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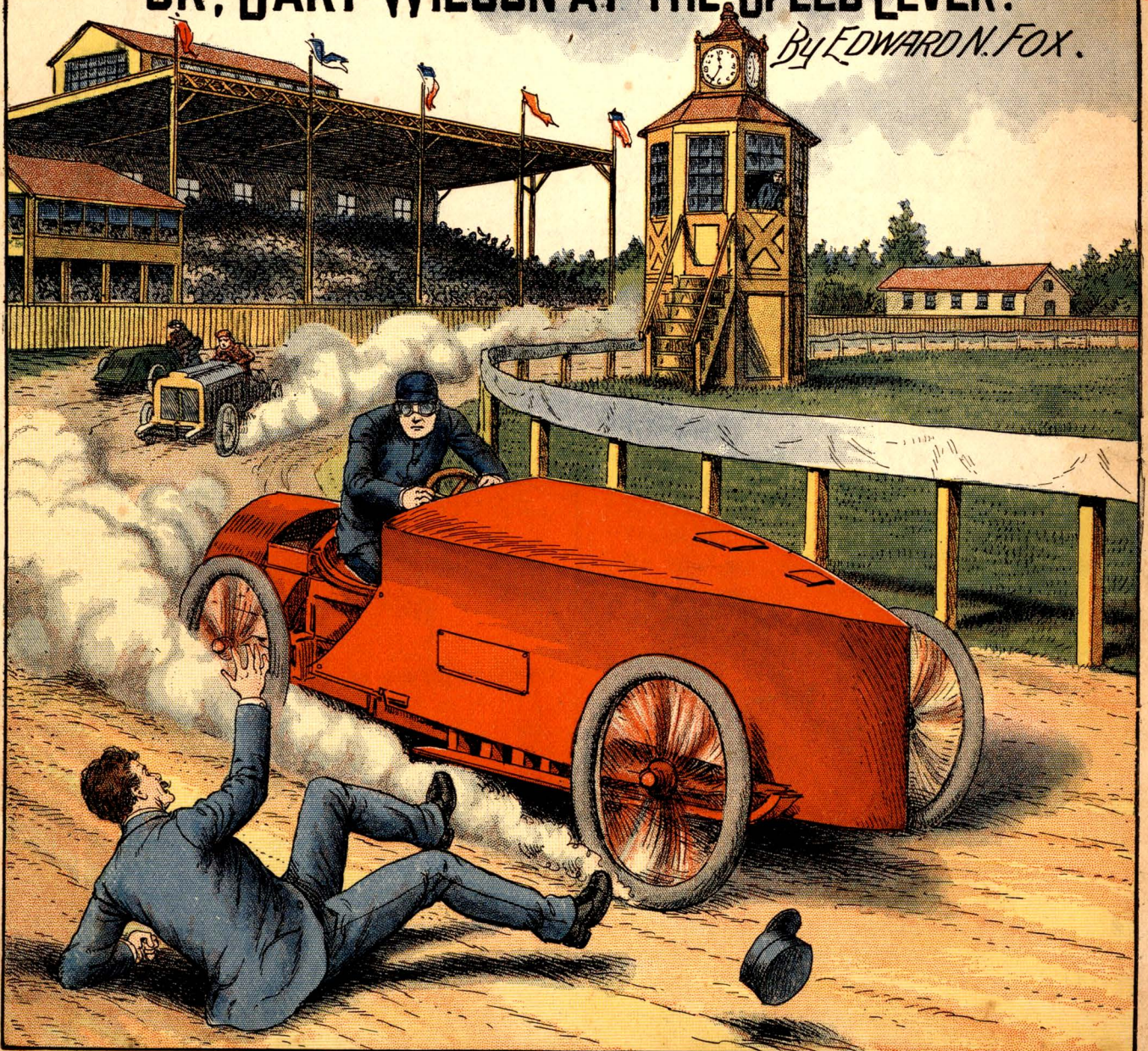
5 CENTS

WIDE AWAKE

A COMPLETE STORY **WEEKLY.** EVERY WEEK.

SMASHING THE AUTO RECORD;
OR, BART WILSON AT THE SPEED LEVER.

By EDWARD N. FOX.



Whizz! Slam! The speed was terrific, nerve-racking, heart-tearing! A second dropped meant the race lost. Bart was numb to feeling, but his hot blood leaped through a brain that throbbed for winning. Dunham somersaulted backward for his life!

WIDE AWAKE WEEKLY

A COMPLETE STORY EVERY WEEK.

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SMASHING THE AUTO RECORD.

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By **EDWARD N. FOX.**

CHAPTER I.

OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS AT BART'S DOOR.

"I'll do the best I can. Ring me up in fifteen minutes. Five, eh? Oh, well—all right. But I can't promise a thing!"

There was a worried look on the fat, round, red face of Mr. Thomas Morton as he hung up the telephone receiver with a snap.

"If you want to go crazy, start a garage!"

The remark was shot off at only the open air in the office and on the other side of the open window.

At least, so Morton thought.

But his last impatient words, like the fragments of the telephone message, had passed through the open window to the ears of two boys who stood on the sidewalk close by.

"Now, I wonder what ails him?" mused Bart Wilson, aloud.

"Oh, let him have just a trouble or two, if he wants 'em," urged Ding Batson, snappishly. "Lord knows we've got misfortunes enough of our own."

"But perhaps I could help him out," hinted Bart.

"Who wants to help a stranger out?" snorted Ding.

"I do, especially when there's a dollar in it—as there sometimes is."

"We need a dollar badly enough," agreed Ding, with a disagreeable laugh.

"And perhaps we can get it."

"That's what you always——"

"Hush! Listen!"

Mr. Morton had thrown open the door of his office. Standing in the doorway, the proprietor called out across the big shed:

"You, Terry!"

"Yes, sir!"

"Mr. Huntman has telephoned in for a man who can get a busted automobile running. He's fifteen miles away, out at Dalton. Wants a man who can start the car again and bring him in here. Any idea where I can get such a man?"

"No, sir."

"Neither have I, confound it! But I've simply got to get a chauffeur somewhere. I'll telephone everybody and see what I can do."

Mr. Morton again went to the telephone.

Bart listened, gathering, from what he heard, that Mr. Morton had telephoned to three places without success in finding his man, and was now trying a fourth.

An inspiration came to Bart. It is said that opportunity knocks but once or twice at any man's door. He who doesn't hear the knock is the man who doesn't succeed in life.

But Bart had long been listening for that knock.

"Ding," he whispered, eagerly, "I'm going to take that job!"

Ding Batson drew back, staring at his friend in amazement.

"You?" echoed Ding. "You can't do it!"

"Why not?" questioned Bart, with a queer smile.

"You've never run an automobile in your life!"

"Is that any sign that I never can?"

"You can't do it!"

"Can't, eh? Ding Batson, 'can't do it' is your sole motto in life. You're always thinking of what you can't do. I'm thinking of what I can do."

"But you can't. You try it, and you'll probably blow yourself sky high—if the man in there is crazy enough to trust the job to you."

"I can do it; I know I can," Bart asserted, tranquilly.

"And—I'm going in—to—the blooming job!"

As Bart announced this conclusion, he slicked down and brushed his clothes with his hands, took a soiled and travel-stained handkerchief from his pocket to brush off his boots, and finally felt to make sure that there was still some part in his hair.

He was anything but a trampish-looking boy, though a shrewd observer would have known that both he and Ding were "on the tramp" just at that time.

They were, in fact, traveling in search of a job.

Already they were more than a hundred miles from the place that they had known as home.

Bart had been brought up by an uncle, Henry Travers. Ding was a "State boy," whom Travers had taken from an institution.

Henry Travers had recently died, leaving nothing but a farm ready for foreclosure, and a daughter, who, being married in comfortable circumstances, cared nothing for either the farm or the boys.

So the boys, in the best clothes that they had left, had started on the tramp and the hunt for work.

They had been at it a week. Footsore and all but discouraged, they had seen their capital dwindle from two dollars and forty cents to just eight almost useless coppers.

Bart was sixteen, five feet five, rather broad of shoulder and somewhat stocky of build.

Ding was of the same age, but smaller, lighter—and more useless.

Yet the boys had been together for five years, had always got on well together, and they did not propose to part now if it could be helped.

"Come on, Ding, if you want," proposed Bart, as soon as he had finished his brief slicking-up.

"Aw, dont——"

"Stay here, then!" Bart retorted, blithely. "You'll be just as much use here."

With that Bart Wilson strode around to the open, broad entrance to the garage, as a place is called where automobiles are stored and taken care of.

A few short steps across the asphalt flooring, and Bart's hand was on the knob of the office door.

"Thunderation!" growled Mr. Morton, as he hung up the receiver, after the fifth call. "Isn't there a man left in the country who knows how to run an automobile?"

"Just one left, sir!" announced Bart, as he stepped quietly into the comfortable little office.

"What? Who?——" began Morton, wheeling around upon the boy.

It was a nervy thing to do, the thing that had jumped into Bart's active, never-afraid brain.

But the boy had made up his mind to take all the chances he could find lying around loose.

So he smiled back at the proprietor of the garage. He met Morton's gaze steadily.

"I couldn't help hearing," Bart went on, hurriedly, "that you wanted a brakeman for a chug-wagon."

"A what?" gasped Mr. Morton.

"A chuff—chaff—what-do-you-call-'em?"

"A chauffeur," supplied Mr. Morton.

"Yes, sir. That's as good as any other slang name, I guess."

"Are you wasting my time, boy—or do you know where I can find such a man?"

"Yes, sir."

"Where?"

"Look straight ahead of you, sir—at me!"

"You? But you're only a boy!"

"I'll outgrow that, sir. And I've got some other good points. I need the job, sir. Can I have it?"

"What do you know about driving an automobile?" queried Mr. Morton, struck, despite his worry, by the originality of this new youngster.

"Don't know anything—yet," Bart answered, truthfully.

"Where did you ever run an auto car?"

"Never did."

"Get out of here, then!" roared Mr. Morton, angrily. "What do you mean by coming in here to waste my time like this?"

"But I could run a car—I know I could," Bart urged, respectfully. "I once 'fired' a stationary engine for two weeks."

"Humph!" grated the other. "Are you crazy?"

"No, sir. Simply full of nerve."

"Humph! I should say you were. Do you think I could send you out, at once, to run an eight-thousand-dollar machine?"

"Try me!"

"Bosh! But you claim to know all about a stationary engine."

"I didn't say that—quite—but I think I know something about an engine."

"Tell me what makes an engine go, then," commanded Mr. Morton.

He leaned back over a high desk. He had not the slightest faith that this boy could be of any use to him; but at least Bart could be silenced by being shown how ignorant he was.

But Bart Wilson was at least half a mile removed from being ignorant about a simple stationary engine.

Question after question he answered—so straight, too, that Mr. Morton began to look interested in him.

Ting-a-ling-ling!

Thomas Morton started as he took down the receiver.

"Yes," he replied to some invisible person, "this is Morton. No; I haven't got on the track of a man for you yet."

"But you think you're going to land one all right," nudged Bart, who had stepped close to the other's elbow.

"But I think I can land one, all right," Thomas Morton repeated.

"All right. Good boy, Tom! Depend upon you. Call you again in five minutes. If you fail me—look out for yourself! Good-bye!"

Ting-a-ling-ling!

The man at the other end had already rung off in quick, jerky fashion.

Mr. Morton swore as he hung up the receiver.

His face was working with wrath as he turned swiftly upon Bart.

"Boy, what on earth did you say that in my ear for? Of course I had to repeat it! Now I'm in a pretty mess. Huntman will depend upon me. If I fail him—well, life won't be worth living!"

"Oh, that's all right," Bart answered, as coolly as before. "You won't fail him. You'll send me. And I'll put axle-grease on the hubs and whirl the chug-cart down here in no time!"

"I wonder if you could learn anything in a few minutes? Oh, pshaw, of course you couldn't. It's crazy. And Huntman will fix me now for fooling him!"

"You've got a machine or two out there in the barn," Bart insisted—for he had not for a single instant given up the notion that he would get the job and put it through. Take me out to one of the toot-chariots and show me how the harness goes on."

"Crazy idea!" Morton repeated, gloomily.

"Might be crazier. Show me, anyway—do! It'll amuse you, sir, and won't hurt me."

"Come on, then—you juvenile lunatic!"

Thomas Morton led the way hastily out into the great shed-like place.

Terry was there, washing a machine, but Terry knew nothing about running an auto, and was one of those stupid fellows who never could learn.

Two minutes later Thomas Morton, down on hands and knees, was busy explaining all the principal parts of a car and the uses of those parts.

Bart Wilson, down on his knees, and part of the time on his stomach, was taking it all in.

Yes, he was literally "taking it in"—drinking it in, absorbing the information, mastering it, storing it away for future use. For Bart was one of those not uncommon youngsters who have a genius for machinery.

"Have you any idea what's wrong with Mr. Huntman's machine?" our hero asked.

"Yes, for I know the machine well. See here——"

Mr. Morton was soon deep in the explanations, that Bart drank in as sand soaks up the rain.

Ting-a-ling-ling!

"Telephone, sir," warned Terry.

Thomas Morton started on a run for his office.

Bart, too, soft-footed as a cat, was at his heels.

Morton, as he pulled down the receiver, was unconscious of the fact that the boy was in the room at all.

"You've got my chauffeur, haven't you?" Bart heard come over the wire.

"Yes; I've got the right party—a good one," Bart whispered in Morton's ear.

Before he had time to check himself the proprietor of the garage repeated the message word for word.

Then, still holding the receiver to his ear, the tantalized man whirled around to scowl fiendishly at Bart.

"Have him come up on the six-thirteen train. I'll meet him at the depot," sounded the voice at the other end.

"Tell him I'm quite a young fellow, but that I know my business," Bart egged his victim on.

Mr. Morton, cold sweat coming out of every pore, repeated this news.

"Don't care if he's an infant, if he knows what to do," sounded Huntman's voice. "I've got to have the machine at your place to-night for instant repairs. Hurry him along. If your man misses the train, or fails me, I'll close you up out of business for good. You know what Rob Huntman's word means! Hustle your man along! Good-bye!"

As the bell tinkled the ring-off, Thomas Morton sank into the nearest chair.

"I'm in for it now," he groaned, staring dazedly at Bart. "Rob Huntman holds a mortgage on this place. He can close me out, and he will, if you fail him."

Bart stole outside the office, while Morton continued to stare at the floor.

Honk! honk! The sound, from the shed, carried Morton out there at a leap.

He was just in time to see Bart, seated on the driver's seat, on the machine they had been looking over, move the forward lever.

"Just going to run out a little way, to show you I can do it," Bart called, cheerfully.

"Stop! That machine belongs to——"

It wasn't a matter of any consequence to whom the machine belonged, for Bart, now out on the road, turned the car northward and ran busily down the street.

Thomas Morton, aghast, followed to the door, staring with all his might.

He saw Bart go a little way down the quiet street, travel at a good speed, then slow, turn neatly and come pounding back.

Honk! honk!

"Look out!" sang out Bart.

He turned in through the entrance, ran up on the asphalt floor, slowed, came to a pretty and not jerky stop and jumped out of the car.

"Do I get that job?" he smiled.

"Blazes! You'll have to!" groaned the cornered man. "You've got me in a fearful scrape if you don't make good."

"I will," Bart promised, readily. "Now give me the railroad fare and your orders—for it's six o'clock now."

A minute later Bart Wilson ran out of the garage and headed for the depot.

"And to think I couldn't go myself for being too near-sighted to drive at night!" groaned the unhappy Morton, as he saw Bart dart around the nearest corner. "O Lord, I wonder if the boy'll make anything like a bluff at getting through with the job?"

A boy who had been standing so close to the wall as to seem to be trying to wipe himself out of view now edged close to Mr. Morton.

"Bart can't do it," Ding Batson informed the proprietor. "It was crazy of you to give him that job."

"Of course it was," Morton readily admitted. "Gracious! there's the train leaving the depot now!"

Though darkness soon came on, that soft May night, Mr. Morton did not feel like going home to supper.

Instead, he sat in his office, waiting, thinking, hoping, dreading.

And, as Ding appeared to have no other place to go, Morton invited that youngster to a seat there, too.

Nine o'clock had struck. Hardly had the last note of the chime died away when——

Honk! honk!

"Good Lord, that's the horn on Huntman's car!" ejaculated Morton, leaping to his feet.

He and Ding got out of the office in time to see the great, flaring lights of a big car turn as the ponderous machine came slowly into the shed—with Bart Wilson calm, happy, supreme at the lever!

Then the car stopped, and from the rear seat boomed a great voice:

"Tom Morton, this looks like a kid you sent me—but he carried the goods. I'm going to give him ten dollars for the service. And I want to see him here to-morrow morning at nine o'clock."

Ding was all gasp and stare, mouth wide open and eyes as much so.

But Mr. Thomas Morton felt like a man glad over waking from a bad dream.

Huntman, a big and powerful man of fifty, with smooth-shaven, hawk-like face and eagle eyes, alighted and stamped into the office.

"Did you tell Huntman how little you know about an auto?" demanded Morton, in a sharp whisper.

"What on earth do you take me for?" Bart demanded, smiling queerly. "I got the blamed thing going and coaxed it in here, didn't I?"

CHAPTER II.

TESTING THE AUTO BOY'S NERVE.

"You've got to learn to run one of these machines, too, Ding."

"I can't learn," Dingley Batson replied, shaking his head.

"How on earth do you know?"

"Because I know I can't."

"All you know, Ding, is that you can't do things," retorted Bart, wearily. "I don't believe I ever knew you to say 'I'll try.' You know, right off, that you 'can't.' Why don't you brace up and learn?"

"Oh, I can't," sighed Ding, not stubbornly, but in a tone of grief.

Bart turned away a little impatiently, walked over to the garage doorway and stood looking out at a beautiful scene.

It was not the same garage in the town of Deepstead.

It was a month later, in the full, warm splendor of June, and now the boys lodged in two little rooms in the great stone building that served as a garage at Clonmere, the handsome country place of Robert Huntman, the great man of finance.

For Huntman had been true to his promise to see Bart on the day after that on which Bart had made his first acquaintance with automobiles.

The great capitalist, pleased with the boy's appearance, and with his masterly way of going at machinery, had offered the boy the post of second chauffeur.

Emery, Huntman's first chauffeur, had taught the boy much about the running of the great, swift cars.

And now, Emery having left to go to another position, Bart was left in charge of Huntman's garage for the time being—until a new first chauffeur was secured.

There were four touring cars and two runabouts in the garage.

Bart, though he had seldom taken Mr. Huntman abroad, had done much in that line for the rich man's guests.

"I don't see what you want me to learn to run a machine for," Ding went on, discontentedly. "Hain't I got enough to do keeping this place and the cars clean?"

"But don't you understand, you stupid old lout," Bart insisted, "that there'd be a chance here for you to be second chauffeur?"

"Second choff—chiff—cheff——" stumbled Ding.

"Second chauffeur—yes, that's the job for you," Bart announced, eagerly.

"But that's your job," objected Ding, wonderingly.

"It won't be for long."

"Going to chuck it up? Going somewhere else?" demanded Ding, looking truly startled.

"Oh, no," Bart laughed, easily. "I'm going to be the new first here—that's all."

"When did Mr. Huntman say that?"

"He didn't say it."

"Then how——"

"Mr. Huntman doesn't even know that I'm going to be his first man," Bart explained, serenely. "I haven't told him yet. You see, I just decided upon it myself about two minutes ago."

Ding stared at his friend in open-mouthed, stupid wonder.

"Maybe you think I've got a nerve," Bart challenged.

"I do."

"Why shouldn't I be first farm-hand at the stove-lifter on these steam-carts?" Bart queried, slangily. "I'm in

charge here just now. Why shouldn't I keep on being in charge? That's what I mean to do."

"Going to post Mr. Huntman up on your decision?" quizzed Ding.

"I'm going to ask Mr. Huntman about it," Bart replied. "And I'm going to state my case with all the push that I can, too."

"Not a bad idea, really!" boomed a great voice that made them both jump.

Robert Huntman, great man in the world of money, and a good employer, too, to those who worked for him faithfully, stepped from out of sight through the doorway and into the garage.

"So you really think you could be first chauffeur for me, do you, Wilson?" asked the capitalist.

"I know it, sir," Bart answered, promptly.

"It's rather a responsible position, isn't it?" asked the man of millions. "Think how much there will be to learn?"

"Think how much I have learned, sir, since the first time I drove your car," Bart urged, respectfully.

"How much have you learned?" smiled his employer, quizzically.

"Well, sir, two hours before I met you at Dalton I didn't know the first thing about running a car."

"What's that?"

"The truth, sir."

Bart fell into a narration of the way that he came to take up motoring as a profession.

"Why, this is something I can't believe. It's preposterous," cried Robert Huntman.

"Mr. Morton will back up my story, sir, any time you ask him," Bart hinted. "Now, sir, if I've been giving good satisfaction on what I've learned in a few weeks, don't you think I can step up and be first chauffeur, and go on learning? I won't leave you, either, the way Emery did. It's something to have a devil-cart steerer—I beg your pardon, a chauffeur—who won't leave you in a hurry."

"I'll think it over, anyway," nodded Mr. Huntman.

"And, by the way, Wilson, keep close, for I may need you on a second's notice. That's what I came out to say."

"I'll stay here, sir, until I hear from you."

Bart, full in the doorway now, watched until he had seen his employer reach the great white house.

Then our hero turned upon his friend.

"That's the way to do things, Ding! I'm to be first-push here from now on."

"Mr. Huntman didn't say so."

"No; but you wait and see!"

"Oh, you can't get the job," argued Ding.

"Keep your 'can'ts' to yourself, won't you, old fellow? Don't hoodoo me with them, too!"

Bart strolled back through the spotless garage, with its six handsome, brand-new-looking cars.

Ding, stupid as he might be in some things, was at least a faithful, hard-working fellow.

His job being to keep things clean, he made them fairly shine.

Bart looked almost lovingly over the fine automobiles that he now believed were to remain in his charge from now on.

"There's only one thing we need here, Ding," he called, at last.

"What's that?"

"A racing car."

"Pshaw! One more machine to clean!"

"We're going to have it, too, Ding, I'll bet, for I heard Mr. Huntman talking about it yesterday."

"Then you can't be first-push, as you call it."

"Why not?"

"First-push would be the fellow who ran the racer."

"Well? That'll be me," Bart declared.

"Humph!"

"All I need now to make me happy is to have the bossing of a racer. Say, Ding, think what a thing it would be to run the machine that smashed the world's auto record!"

"I'd sooner have a raise of pay," Ding retorted.

"Humph! Any old mud is good enough for you to stick in, isn't it, Ding?"

Ting-a-ling-ling!

It was the garage telephone, connecting with the house, that rang.

"Hello," Bart responded, as quickly as he could reach the 'phone.

"'Ello! Who's that?"

"Wilson."

"This is Hawkins," announced Mr. Huntman's English valet.

"Go ahead, Hawk!"

At any other time this familiar address would have raised a torrent of abuse from the valet, but now he went on quickly:

"Mr. Huntman's orders. A quick machine—the best you've got—at the front door without a second's delay. Have plenty of oil for a long run!"

"There inside of sixty seconds, Hawk!"

Bart was never caught napping. He hung up the receiver like a flash and sprang to one of the cars, flashed the jumping spark, got the engine going, and at the same time shouted:

"Road togs, Ding! Like lightning!"

As he straightened up, Batson helped him into the long coat, handed him the goggles and held out the cap.

It seemed to be a matter only of seconds before Bart was up on his seat.

Nor had his feet more than touched the floor of the car when the forward lever moved slightly over.

Whish! The great forty-five horse-power car started lazily out of the garage.

Yet within forty feet from the doorway the speed increased.

Honk! honk! honk!

At its loudest the horn sounded, as Bart put on a spurt of speed going up the driveway.

This auto boy was all for speed. Generally the Huntman

orders were for too little speed, but now Bart felt justified in dashing up to the door.

As he drew up, two men appeared on the veranda.

Bart made as pretty a sharp, short stop as he could—a stop without a sign of jerk in it.

"Fast work this afternoon, Wilson," called Mr. Huntman.

The man of millions looked as cool and indifferent as usual, but Bart, who always studied his employer, fancied that he saw signs of excitement under the surface.

With him was another man, of middle age—a stranger, the boy believed, though the disfiguring, disguising road goggles hid most of the expression of the face.

"This is a high-priced ride," Bart heard the other man whisper to Huntman. "Two million dollars at stake!"

Bart jumped. But he did not disbelieve the words. He had been long enough with this employer to know that sometimes games with great stakes were played by this capitalist.

"Where to, sir?" Bart asked, as Huntman entered the tonneau or rear compartment of the car.

"Dean's place in Bedford."

"What speed, sir?"

"The fastest you can make without risking the machine or getting us into trouble with the law!"

"Yes, sir."

"And, Wilson——"

"Yes, sir."

"Whatever you do, don't let us break down. This is the most important drive you're ever likely to make. A vast amount depends on our reaching Dean in time."

"We'll reach him, sir!"

Bart waited, either for further instructions or for the order to start.

"Only a boy, but he has asked to be my first chauffeur," Bart heard Mr. Huntman whisper to his companion.

"Too young?"

"Perhaps we can judge this afternoon. What are you waiting for, Wilson?"

"For word to go, sir?"

"Go—and eat up the miles!"

Honk! Chug! Whir! The great car was fairly speeding by the time it went out upon the highway.

Bedford, as Bart knew, was forty-eight miles away.

But with this high-powered car the distance could be covered in less time than it would take to go by train.

"Forty eight miles, and two millions at stake," flashed the boy, as he kept his hands employed and his eyes searching down the road. "Allowing for difference in roads and slowing down through villages, if I'm a second more than an hour and a half I deserve to be drowned in a lake of gasoline!"

Over the incessant rattle and whirr of cogs he could not hear a word of the talk behind him.

Indeed, Huntman and his friend were obliged to talk right at each other's ears, for Bart had let out the speed for all it was worth.

It was exhilarating sport—the fastest speed that Bart had yet made for any considerable distance.

As he passed a landmark that told off the first twenty miles of the trip, Bart dug out his watch.

"Thirty-two minutes, with all the slow-downs!" he thrilled. "Not bad for a green boy."

On they sped, not quite at full gait, but yet the air beat against their faces.

There was a "nasty one" just ahead now—a bit of road that turned with a sharp bend upon a railroad track at a point where there was no crossing-tender.

The spot was marked in red ink on Wilson's road-map.

Bart had started to slow down, but Mr. Huntman, discovering this, leaned forward, giving him two sharp digs in the back.

"Orders are orders," grimaced the boy. He let out the speed once more.

And now they whirled around the bend, sighting the track.

Worst of all, they sighted a train bearing swiftly down upon the crossing.

Jupiter!" Bart tingued.

Train and auto car were coming so swiftly together—were so close—that a smash seemed beyond question.

Bart's judgment told him that safety lay most surely in jumping the machine forward at its greatest spurt.

His hand flew to the lever, but in that instant Mr. Huntman leaned over him, shouting:

"Reverse!"

It seemed certain death, for the car could not be stopped in time to get back clear of the train.

But it was an order.

Bart's hand flew to the reversing lever. He jammed it hard.

There was a second's pause—a great jar and quiver throughout the frame of the auto.

Right a-top of them, almost, loomed the great, black, crushing engine.

Then the auto jolted backward—touched, though, for, as the train whizzed by, the auto was slewed around sideways, while shrieks went up from car windows.

But Bart, white as death, hung to his levers and his presence of mind.

Hardly had the slew begun when the car veered once more and slid gracefully back as the rear of the train passed them.

Now Bart would have driven forward once more, and over the crossing, as if nothing had happened.

But Mr. Huntman's voice rang out:

"Stop!"

Obediently Bart brought the machine to a halt.

Huntman and his guest leaped to the ground, Bart still sitting coolly by his levers and steering gear.

"Get down, too, Wilson, and see if the car is hurt," commanded Mr. Huntman.

"I don't think she can be, sir," Bart replied, as he sprang down to the ground. "She minds her control. No,

sir; you see, there's been no damage except that big dent in front. None of the machinery hurt."

"That was a fearfully close shave," shivered Huntman's companion.

"It was," the man of millions agreed.

"It seemed to me, Huntman, that the best thing to do was to jam on speed fast ahead."

"I realize that now," agreed the capitalist. "But you were just reversing when I told you, weren't you, Wilson?"

"I should have jammed ahead, sir, if you hadn't called. It seemed ten times safer."

"You think so?"

"I was certain that reversing would kill us all, sir."

"Then why did you reverse?"

"Because I'm here to follow orders."

"You'd follow them to death?" gasped the man of millions.

"That's what I thought I was doing," Bart admitted, honestly.

"Wilson," and Huntman's voice shook a trifle, "there's real stuff in you."

"There ought to be some stuff, Mr. Huntman, in the chap who has the levers of a high-powered car under his hand."

"Wilson, I guess we'd better shake hands."

"On what, sir?" demanded Bart, audaciously, as he put his hand in that of his employer. "Are you thinking of making me first-push—I mean, first chauffeur?"

It was striking while the iron was hot.

But Huntman was too old and too shrewd a man to be caught on an impulse.

"I'm thinking of that matter," was all he answered.

CHAPTER III.

"THROUGH OR BUST!"

Bart brought the machine up at a sudden stop.

It was so sudden, so jerky, so jolting, that the two men on the rear seat rose without meaning it, pitching across the back of the driver's seat.

They were within four miles of Bedford, now, and running well within the schedule that the young chauffeur was trying to keep.

"What did you do that for, Wilson?" demanded his employer.

"Necessary!"

"What?"

"See that stuff ahead, sir?" asked the boy, pointing down the road.

"What stuff?"

"Can't you see it, sir, about three hundred feet ahead? Road strewn with broken glass. Wouldn't do a thing to our tires!"

Mr. Huntman thought he saw the glass now, and paled.

"Anybody interested in stopping your getting through?" Bart asked, carelessly.

"Interested in stopping me? I should say so!"

"That was the trick relied upon, then," Bart affirmed.

"Do you suppose any one has been covering your movements by telephone?"

"That must be the case!" exclaimed Huntman's companion, in a voice that shook.

"We'll try to fool 'em," Bart announced. "There's too much glass ahead to pick it all up. But back an eighth of a mile is a crossroad that we can take."

Backing, slowly, he made a short turn and sped back.

The crossroad was a rough one, used by few but farmers.

Here the loam and sand was loose and deep. The heavy, tired wheels sank in deeply, but the auto's engine was a strong one.

Bart crowded on what speed he could, and was doing very fairly, until—

Bang! The report came from the left front tire.

In that deep soil it did not take long to stop. Bart brought the car up as quickly as he could.

In another twinkling he was over the side with parts of his repair kit.

"What's wrong now?" demanded Huntman, uneasily.

"More glass," blazed Bart, as he worked away like lightning.

"Glass—up here on this road? I don't see any."

"Because it's buried in this loose soil," Bart returned, not looking up from his work.

Having finished his job, Bart Wilson darted up the road a little way, eying the ground keenly.

Presently he pounced down, drew up a bit of glass that had been well imbedded in the dirt and flew back to show it.

"Probably, Mr. Huntman, there's glass enough in the road ahead to cut a dozen tires to pieces. The job has been well done."

"Wilson, do you know any way of getting us through in time, despite the treachery that has been at work along here?"

"Shall I take chances?" Bart asked, quickly.

"It must be through—or bust!"

"You'll stand for anything, sir?"

"Anything that gives us the best show to get through to the end of the trip inside of twenty minutes—it mustn't be twenty-five!"

"I understand, sir!"

Leaping back to his seat, Bart started the speed slowly.

At the same time he steered well to the right.

Mr. Huntman certainly looked astonished when the car turned off into a rough field.

The land here had been ploughed, but not planted.

As slowly as if they were creeping the heavy car moved over this tough roadbed.

There was danger that at any instant the tires would sink so deeply into the soft soil as to stop progress and leave them stalled there.

Bart knew the chances, but they were the only ones he could take.

White-faced, quivering inwardly, he kept his every thought on his work.

Twice the auto seemed on the point of stopping, nearly hub-deep in the soft, damp loam.

But he crowded on a little more effort.

At last they were clear of the ploughed ground, but now they struck rough, uneven pasture.

It was tough! The "rocky road to Dublin" could not have made worse going.

But it was a harder bottom here, and Bart, who was groaning over the time lost in the ploughed field, let out on speed.

Rattle! bump! jolt! tip! Whirring over that anything but level pasture, the car traveled, much of the time, on two wheels, with the opposite side of the car high in air.

But our hero, with his feet braced and his hands and brain equally active, ground his teeth together in the spirit of sheer recklessness which alone could now save Mr. Huntman's game, whatever that might be.

On the rear seat the two passengers clutched and hung on, gasping, but game and silent.

It was "through or bust!" Bart Wilson didn't care a continental how soon they "busted" if they could get "through."

But now they came to a level bit of pasture, and here Bart turned smoothly toward the road, there being no wall in the way.

Instead, a rail fence barred their way.

The fence might be strong, or it might be weak.

Bart, traveling at such speed as he was now able to get out of the engine, glanced ahead and took chances.

Too strong a fence, and the machine might be wrecked—those inside killed.

But "through or bust!" kept ringing in the boy's ears.

Crash! R-r-rip! They were through, now, and out on the road again, leaving a demolished fence behind.

A minute more, and they had turned down a hard, macadam road, spurring for Bedford, Bart with his fascinated gaze on the smooth road ahead, keenly alert for a sight of anything that could put a hole through a tire.

But they reached the village, passed through, and now Mr. Huntman was bawling the directions to Mr. Dean's country place.

They turned out on a pretty, shaded avenue. It was smooth here, and Bart Wilson crowded on the speed, though his fingers felt numb and his hands were shaking from the long strain and the wear and tear on his brain.

"Slow up and go through the next gate to the right. Make no sign of haste now," bawled Mr. Huntman in his ear.

So Bart ran the car lazily up the long, shaded driveway to a handsome country house of stone that looked more like a castle.

He made a dignified stop before the entrance. Mr. Huntman and his companion stepped out with easy, slow dignity, as if there had been no "through or bust" orders.

Yet Bart thrilled, for Mr. Huntman, in a whisper, delivered himself:

"Bully boy, Wilson!"

Then the two passengers had stepped inside the doorway, and Bart drove his car around to the rear, stopping near the stables.

He got out, looked over the tires and the car in general, then stood idly by.

From his post the front entrance to Dean's was plainly visible.

Fifteen minutes or so had gone by when, around a bend in the driveway, a carriage drawn by two horses dashed into sight.

It stopped, the horses steaming, before the front door.

Two men, one old and gray-haired, the other middle-aged, got out.

As they did so, they caught sight of the sleeping automobile—and started.

"The pair we beat, I reckon," mused Bart.

The two men quickly turned away again, just as a cab rolled smartly in the wake of the first carriage.

The younger of the two strangers stepped to the cab window as if to say a few words.

Then, with all haste, the two new visitors disappeared within the doorway.

"Wonder what the two-million-dollar game is, and how it's coming on?" mused Bart.

Though he did not seem to be looking directly their way, our hero saw three men get out of the cab.

They did not attempt to enter the house, but stood together, chatting in low tones and looking around them.

After a few moments one of the trio, a short, thickset man of thirty or thereabouts, sauntered along in the direction of the Huntman car.

"Yes," muttered Bart, inwardly, "I'll keep a sharp eye on you!"

Straight onward came the stranger, glancing at the young chauffeur and at the car as if with impartial curiosity.

"Quite a craft," hailed the stranger, in what was meant to be an agreeable voice.

"Yes," Bart acknowledged, indifferently.

"Who does it belong to?"

"Guess!" hinted Bart.

Just a trifle confused the stranger appeared, but after an instant he persisted:

"Belong to Mr. Huntman?"

"You win!"

Slowly the stranger drew out a thick pile of bank-notes, eyed them, then glanced up at Bart.

"Care for 'em?" asked the stranger, carelessly, but very low.

"Might come handy," the lad admitted.

"Willing to earn the money?"

"How?"

"Can you be trusted?"

"Guess!"

Stepping still closer, the stranger whispered:

"Take a few suggestions from us for some crooked work and this wad may be yours."

Quick enough the answer came.

Biff! Bart's fist shot out like a trip-hammer, catching the fellow under the jaw, knocking him flat and sending the money flying.

And Bart Wilson, brandishing a heavy wrench, stood over the man, shouting:

"You sneaky cur! Try to get up before I say so, and—I'll brain you!"

CHAPTER IV.

DEEP IN THE MUD OF A NASTY PLOT.

"Let me up before any one sees! Don't be a fool!"

This came in a half-bullying, half-coaxing tone from the man whom the young chauffeur had downed. He dared not retaliate, after making that crooked offer, mad as he was. Moreover, he was paid to gain Bart's aid in his scheme, and therefore did not resent the blow. It was to his interest to keep the boy's friendship.

A second after the thump Bart had begun to regret his rash haste.

So he replied, quickly:

"I don't like bluffs about money. I could make too good use of that stuff, if it's real. Get up!"

As he spoke, Bart tossed the wrench back under his own seat.

"Now, if you're trying to fool with me," he went on, "you'd better get to a safe distance before I do something else to you."

"What do you want to be so blamed quick for?" demanded the stranger, as soon as he got on his feet. Secretly he was delighted at having won Bart over.

"I can't stand being joshed about a lot of money," Bart answered, in a pretendedly sulky tone.

The man devoted himself, first of all, to gathering up his cast-away bank-notes.

But now he came close to young Wilson, murmuring:

"That money is meant for you—only a small bit of cash on account. I was not fooling, as you seemed to think.

"What's that?" Bart asked, sharply.

"Slip this cash in your pocket," wheedled the man, moving closer, until the pile of bank-notes touched Bart's fingers.

Nothing loath, the boy stowed the money away in a pocket.

"There's two thousand dollars there," announced the stranger, bending over and looking at the auto as if he were inspecting it with a good deal of curiosity.

"Don't spring any more con games," Bart begged, tremulously.

"Straight goods," affirmed the other. "Don't count it here, but you can get by yourself and do it before you go any further with us. Now, if you do something that we want, a little later, you'll have ten thousand dollars in your

clothes by the time you sit down to supper. Do you want the dough?"

"Does a pup want meat?" retorted young Wilson, tremulously. "But, see here—I can't take any risk of getting in jail!"

"Don't have to. The trick is simple enough."

"Name it, then."

"Will you be game?"

"Haven't I got the first installment of your cash?"

"You'll run Huntman back to his place later this afternoon, of course?"

"I imagine so," Bart admitted.

"You remember the stretch of road through deep woods, just past the old sawmill, about three miles from here?"

"Yes; of course."

"Take that road back."

"What if Mr. Huntman gives other orders?"

"He won't, if he's headed home. He'll be thinking of other matters."

"You seem to know a good deal about Huntman's business," suggested our hero.

This the stranger dodged, but went on:

"In that deep woods you'll come to a place where'll be a big piece of white paper lying at either side of the road. Understand?"

"So far, yes."

"Just as you spot that paper, slow down—with a jolt. Understand?"

"Yes."

"Say something is wrong with the machinery, and get out to look."

The stranger, now looking at the gearing underneath the car, paused in his low-spoken remarks.

"Well?" demanded Bart, eagerly.

"You won't be suspected on any hand in what happens. But in the excitement the rest of the money will be slipped to you on the quiet. You'll get it. You can trust me. You see how I am trusting you—with that big wad down in advance."

There was silence, as the stranger straightened up, looking Bart craftily in the eyes.

"Well, kid?" he demanded, impatiently, at last.

"I'm thinking," Bart returned, craftily.

"About what?"

"You say that, when I slow up, things will happen, but that I won't be suspected."

"Oh, that's right," nodded the other, carelessly.

"But, if you have preparations on hand for things to happen, don't you suppose Huntman will drop to my part?"

"Yes, he may," nodded the stranger. "But what of it? You'll have ten thousand of your own, and Huntman can't prove anything. You're safe while there's no proof."

"I—guess—I see," Bart pondered, slowly.

"Well, that's the whole trick. Are you mine, or are you too slow?"

"It looks risky," Bart objected, thoughtfully. "I can't afford to get behind the bars."

"You won't; you can't!"

"Besides," tantalized the young chauffeur, "of course, I ain't any fool. When you're throwing money around in this fashion, I've got sense enough to know that there's some big game afloat. Don't you suppose Huntman would pay me more for putting him wise to the trick?"

"He'd think you crazy, and fire you!" leered the other.

"He might not."

"See here," came the swift, ugly warning, "don't you try to play roots with us. It won't work! You've taken the first of our money—you're ours! You play double with us, and you'll not only lose the rest of the cash, but you'll turn out a dead one, as well. See this?"

The stranger threw back one lapel of his coat, displaying, at the top of an inside pocket, the butt of a very businesslike-looking revolver.

"Hold on!" quivered Bart, starting back. "Don't show that sort of thing. I don't like 'em."

He was trembling now from head to foot.

It was a splendid bit of acting, for Bart was revolving a scheme in his own surging brain that not a dozen revolvers could have scared him out of.

"Oh, I'm not threatening you," went on the stranger, glibly, "because you'll not go back on us. If you did—if you do, I'll run you down and plant lead in you! I know where to find you—know all about you. Now, understand me, Bart Wilson. You're ours, and do what we want, or my next job in the world will be to put you out of the world. You serve us, and serve us straight, or you get killed. Is that plain?"

"Too blamed plain!" quivered the boy, his lips shaking now. "I'll do what you say—I'll have to. But don't hang around here any longer, please. I know what you want; I'll do it. Skiddoo, please!"

"I rely on you, then," muttered the stranger, and, turning, strolled back to where his companions and the cab waited, and watched the boy to see if he was going to give the game away to Huntman.

Bart whistled coolly, looked around him, and next busied himself with the oil feed of the automobile.

Seemingly, something made a wrench necessary, for next he reached into the car for one.

Down on his stomach, under the machinery he crawled—and tried to see the cab.

"I can't see those fellows, so they can't see me, either," he muttered. "If I speak to the boss openly, they will see me or may hear me, and I won't find out what their game is. I must notify Huntman on the sly."

Like a flash he had paper and pencil out, scrawling a hurried message to this effect:

"Mr. Huntman: I've just been paid two thousand dollars by one of three fellows in the cab back at the door. They've paid me to stop in a certain stretch of woods on the way home. That's all I know.

"Wilson."

The paper was up his sleeve as Bart crawled out from under the machinery.

He glanced into the car, as if looking for something that needed fixing there.

For an instant he sprang up into the rear part of the car, looked at something there, and next jumped to the ground again.

But in that instant he had left the note on the seat, a small wrench serving as paper-weight.

"Huntman is no fool," he reflected. "When he sees the note he'll know it's there for some purpose. When he knows all I've got to tell him he'll give his own orders. That lets me out until I get more orders."

Fifteen minutes more passed. Then Mr. Huntman and his friend came out, followed by the other pair.

"Friends and foes," smiled Bart. "I wonder if that gray-haired old fellow is at the bottom of the nasty business that I've been let into?"

Huntman and his friend exchanged almost icy bows with the other pair.

Then, instead of signaling for him to speed up to the porch, Huntman, followed by his companion, came toward Bart with the springy step and cheerful air of winners.

"Bully boy, Wilson!" said Mr. Huntman, lightly, once more.

Then he climbed into the tonneau.

Bart, not seeming to watch, was looking covertly.

As he had expected, Mr. Huntman espied the paper and took it, without lifting it into view.

Then his companion climbed in.

"Run up to the porch, Wilson," ordered Huntman, coolly, but again added:

"Bully boy!"

"He understands, and has his own plan," thrilled Bart. "I wonder what it is?"

This as he made a flashing approach to the porch.

Huntman leaned out, looking direct at the older man of the pair.

"Mr. Creston, I wish you and Dalby would take a little spin with me down to the village. We'll stop at the hotel and have a little chat."

"I'm afraid we must get back to town," replied the older man, stiffly.

"I know you're disappointed, Mr. Creston, but we may come to some more pleasant arrangement."

"Not much hope of that," retorted the old man.

"On the contrary, I think there is some slight hope. Come, anyway, for it'll be our last chance at reaching another conclusion, you know."

Creston hesitated, looking at Dalby.

Then the pair—enemies of Mr. Huntman, as Bart knew by instinct—stepped down the porch to whisper together.

"How's that tire going to run, Wilson?" asked the man of millions, leaning forward over the seat.

"I can't tell, sir," Bart replied, feeling sure that this talk was intended only to hide something else.

"Well, do the best you can with it," urged Huntman, and leaned back again.

But Bart had caught sight of a white card that had dropped to the seat beside him.

Carelessly our hero closed his fingers upon the card, then brought it over his knee.

These were the words that stared up at him:

"When my friend and I leave this car, don't give the other fellows a chance to get out. Drive like the dickens with them, anywhere, for two hours, but don't let them have a chance to get down. Drop that cab behind us."

"Come, now, Mr. Creston!" urged Mr. Huntman. "The day is getting short. Of course, you'll come along with us to the hotel. It'll be to your advantage."

"Well, then," Creston answered, as he and Dalby turned. "But only for a few minutes."

"Get in front, Forman," advised Mr. Huntman to his own friend, who climbed over to the seat beside Bart.

The carriage in which Creston and Dalby had reached Dean's was waiting close by.

"Drive to the hotel and wait," called Dalby to the driver.

"Now, then, Huntman," uttered Mr. Creston, "we're quite at your service."

"To the hotel, Wilson," ordered Huntman.

As he slid the forward lever over, Bart Wilson knew that he was playing it blind in a big game.

CHAPTER V.

THE RUNAWAY CHAUFFEUR.

Honk! Whirr! The big car shot forward at as great speed as it was safe to run down the village street.

The cab and Creston's hired carriage had already been left far to the rear.

"To the hotel, Wilson!" Huntman called again.

There was something in his voice which told our hero that it was at the hotel that the trick was to be played.

Bart made a swift approach, then slowed down quickly, stopping the car just before the hotel entrance.

Huntman was out in a jiffy. Forman leaped from the front seat at the same time.

"Let me help you down, Creston," begged Mr. Huntman, in a tone that Bart understood.

The white-haired old man had just started to rise, when—

Jerk! That sudden jolt pitched the old man back into his seat.

Whirr! The big car was traveling off down the street at the biggest speed of which it was capable.

"Stop her!" roared Dalby, rising and standing close to Bart's back.

"Trying to, sir," the boy replied.

He made a great show of trying to pull the lever back.

"What's wrong?" roared Dalby.

"Don't know yet—trying to find out."

"Stop the machine!"

"Can't!"

"Why not?"

"Don't know what's got into the machine."

For just a second Wilson let go of the steering wheel to snatch up a card that Forman had left behind him on the seat.

In that instant the car veered, all but colliding with a two-horse truck that was traveling in the opposite direction.

"Look out!" shrieked Mr. Creston. "You'll smash us up!"

"Try not to," gritted Bart.

Dalby had risen, gripping at the seat-back, and peering over at the boy, the levers, and as much of the machinery as was visible.

But Bart, with the perspiration streaming down his face, and a worried look in his eyes, was acting the part splendidly.

Moreover, the cords in the boy's neck stood out like whipcords—a trick that he was working by tensing his muscles.

"What on earth is it?" called Dalby.

"Wish I knew. Something in the machinery. I can't get the lever back to the stop."

They had shot out of the village now—out on a country road.

Bart wished to glance at the card, but Dalby, standing behind him, interfered.

Bart espied a hump in the road just ahead.

He gave the wheel a turn, steered so as to strike the hump at the worst angle.

Bump! Badly jolted, at that high speed, Dalby tumbled backward into his seat.

Bart snatched a second to glance at the card.

He saw these words, in Huntman's writing:

"Smash the machine, if you have to. Don't hurt anybody."

"I've got my orders," gritted Bart. "Glory! What fun a trip of this kind is!"

Dalby was hanging to the back of his seat again.

"Jerk that lever back hard," he ordered.

Bart leaned back to shout:

"If I do, I may break something."

"Break it, then, but stop!"

"If I make a bad smash in the engine, at this speed, we'll all be killed."

"Nonsense!"

"Know anything about automobiles?"

"Not much," Dalby admitted.

Bart gave an inward sigh of relief.

"Wait until we get to a level road," bawled Dalby in the boy's ear. "Then I'll climb over and see if I can help you."

"Don't you do it."

"Yes, I will!"

"If you do," quivered Bart, "I'll take my chance on jumping and leave you two to manage for yourselves."

"You wouldn't dare jump!"

"I'd sooner jump, and take my chances, than have any amateur help over here at a time like this."

"Do you mean it?"

"If you try to get over," warned Bart, as solemnly as if

he were speaking the truth, "you'll see me jumping in the same second."

"But you don't seem to know how to manage your machine."

"Yes, I do. But something has slipped down and clogged the lever action. I can't get at it until the machine stops."

"But will she ever stop?"

"When the gasoline runs out."

"I hadn't thought of that."

Dalby dropped back with care, talking into Mr. Creston's ear.

They were spurting along a road between open meadows now—at least eight miles from the hotel.

Bart had plainly given up hope of doing anything with the lever. He was steering only, honking the horn and doing his best work at clearing vehicles, dogs, chickens and the few foot-passers whom they met on these country roads.

"Boy," called Dalby, hanging to the back of the seat again, and leaning over, "Mr. Creston is sure that this is some kidnapping scheme."

"Where's the kid?" Bart retorted, unconcernedly.

"You're running away with us on purpose."

"If that was all, it'd be easy," snapped Bart.

"If you don't stop this machine at once you'll get yourself into more trouble than any one boy can endure."

"I'm liable to be killed before this trip stops—so are you, too," our hero grated.

"You'd be killed right now, if I had anything to do the deed with," roared Dalby.

"And then you'd run smash into a church or a town hall!" taunted Bart.

"You'll pay the full penalty for this crime, young man. Stop the machine. Do you realize that Mr. Creston is one of the richest men in the United States? Do you realize how much he can do to punish you for this outrage?"

"I wish you'd shut up and let me keep my attention on this runaway machine," Bart retorted. "If you don't, we'll run into something—sure!"

Out of the corner of his eye, as he half turned toward Dalby, Bart caught sight of a furniture van lumbering along the road just ahead.

Dalby saw it, too.

"Look out!" he yelled.

Bart turned quickly, almost upon the van.

Whizz-zz! The big car shaved by within two inches of the van.

It had taken a steady hand on the steering gear to make such a close shave.

"You see what'll happen if you don't stop talking," Bart warned.

"I know what'll happen when we get on our feet again!" blazed Dalby.

"Shut up and sit down!"

"See here, boy, we know this is all a plot, as well as you do! Get this machine around, under control, and we'll pay you twenty thousand dollars for prompt, right service!"

Money was in the air to-day! Bart could not help quivering at the thought of what would be a fortune to him.

"I'd like to stop—would in a minute, if I could—but a million wouldn't stop this engine now—couldn't!"

"Run back to the village you took us from, then," urged Dalby, unbelievably. "Run around and around there until the engine uses up the gasoline."

Bart saw the scheme—to have him put the car through such a round of swift trips through one village that the police would force him to stop.

Already they had whizzed through three villages without any letting up of speed.

And now they entered a fourth.

In the middle of the main street stood four men—officers, judging by the stars on their coats—all waving their arms in signal to stop.

"Creston's folks or some one has telephoned ahead to stop us," faltered Bart, inwardly.

But he would die sooner than be trapped.

Honk! honk! honk!

The horn blared loudly as the car dashed onward without lowering its speed.

The officers in the middle of the road stood there just as long as they dared to, then jumped frantically to either side of the road.

"Stop—in the—name of the—law!" was blown to our hero's ears as the car dashed wildly onward.

"Shooting at the tires," flamed Bart. "Jupiter! If some of these hayseed cops put a couple of holes in a tire they will have us!"

"You see what trouble you're going to get into with the law!" warned Dalby, over the back of the seat.

"Shut up!"

Out of this last village, Bart espied a road at the left that led up into the hills.

It was a soft, uneven road, but it seemed to lead away from anywhere. That was the kind of a road the young chauffeur wanted just now.

He turned into it, sped up the slope, went over the hill, found a road back.

A dozen times he circled this hill over the long, round-about road.

Dalby tried to object, but again was silenced by a contemptuous:

"Shut up! I'm running this machine—trying to save our lives!"

But at last the running of the engine told our hero that the gasoline was beginning to give out.

The car was running slower, though still at a good clip.

Then, at last, came such a perceptible slowing that Dalby rose to demand:

"Gasoline giving out?"

"Yes—thank goodness!" came the boy's hearty response. His joy seemed almost too great to be a sham.

Slower and slower went the car.

Dalby was now for jumping, a thing that could be safely done, but Mr. Creston objected.

At last they were moving so slowly that Bart, turning off the road, ran in between two trees in the woods.

There the car wedged and stopped.

Like a flash Bart was down on the ground.

He offered a hand to help Mr. Creston out, but Dalby waved him angrily aside.

"Gentlemen," uttered Bart, sorrowfully, "I can't tell you how sorry I am over this accident."

"Don't try to," flared Dalby. "This is all a confounded outrage—a crime! You shall pay for it in all bitterness!"

Old Mr. Creston said nothing, but his pallid lips were pressed together in a way that made Bart feel how great was the old capitalist's rage.

"What do I care, though?" quivered Bart, inwardly. "These men may make some trouble, but Huntman has a little money, too. I've followed out his orders."

"I suppose we've got to walk several miles to somewhere," remarked Mr. Creston, as he looked about him.

"After I've thrashed this scoundrelly boy!" raged Dalby, suddenly.

He made a leap at Bart, who, taken by surprise, dodged only just in time.

Then, retreating to the car, Bart snatched up an ugly looking wrench.

"Keep back!" he warned. "Don't try to tackle me. I'm no punching-bag or a putty boy!"

"Come here, Dalby!" cried Mr. Creston, shrilly. "Leave him alone. We don't want to get into the toils of assassins in this lonely spot. Come with me at once!"

The old man was trembling as he turned to move away to the road.

Dalby wheeled, as if to hear was to obey. He gave his arm to the old man and together they disappeared down the road.

But Bart did not trust to appearances that they were gone. He climbed a tree, close to the road, shielding himself behind the branches. Thus he watched until they were a quarter of a mile away.

Then, quickly sliding to the ground, he looked at the auto with tears in his eyes.

"It seems a shame to do such a thing to an old friend, but I've got to," he muttered.

He got busy for two or three minutes. Then, ashamed to look at his work, he darted for the road, nor did he once look back.

He had disabled, practically ruined the machine. The great, speedy car would never be worth much again.

But there was now, in the disabled machinery under the car, evidence enough to make it seem that, through an accident to the running gear, the auto had really gotten beyond his control on that "runaway" trip.

"I hope it'll be the last grand old auto I'll ever have to spoil," he muttered, brokenly, as he trudged along on his quest for the nearest railway station.

It was late that night when Bart got home—without the machine, of course.

Mr. Huntman and Forman were there ahead of him.

To his employer Bart narrated all that had happened—skewed his large roll of bribe money.

"I'll put that money in my safe for you, Wilson," smiled

his employer, who seemed suddenly to have become almost a friend. "I think it very likely that you'll be able to keep that money, too. The people who really own it are not likely to call for it. Wilson, I want to do something to prove my gratitude to you. I shall think it over well."

"I can help you on your thinking, Mr. Huntman."

"Well?"

"Make me your first-push—I mean, first chauffeur."

"But do you realize, Wilson, that my first chauffeur will have to run a thirty-thousand-dollar French racing machine—the one with which I hope to smash the world's auto record."

"Realize it?" repeated Bart. "Of course I do. That's why I want the job!"

"I'm sorry, my boy, but you don't realize what it means. In the first place, the great value of the best racing automobile in the world. Then the probability that you couldn't get the speed out of it that an old and nervy chauffeur could—a real racing man. And you'd probably kill yourself in the machine. It's no toy—but a man's machine."

"Then I'm sorry, sir, but I shall have to find a new place."

"What's that?"

"I wouldn't stay here, Mr. Huntman," cried the boy, earnestly, "if I had to see some stranger come in and run that machine."

"See here," agreed Huntman, quickly, "you shall have your try at it. If you fail——"

"But I won't! I wouldn't know how to!" cried the boy, treading on air in one delightful second. "And there's one more favor I want to ask."

"Another? What?"

"Let me have Dingley Batson for second chauffeur."

"Why do you ask this?"

"Because poor old Ding is my friend, and he hasn't got sand enough to get anything for himself."

"But will he be any good as a chauffeur?"

"I'll make him O. K. or break his back," Bart promised, readily.

"Very good, then; we'll let your friend have his trial, anyway. And now you must have about all you want to-night?"

"Everything I can think of, sir."

Bart started to leave the room, but Mr. Huntman stopped him.

"Wilson, have you any idea what to-day's work meant for me?"

"I heard you and Mr. Forman talking about it meaning a profit of two million dollars."

"Two million?" smiled Mr. Huntman. "Yes; that was all Forman saw in it. He's one of my managers. Wilson, I think to-day's work will make me an even richer man than Creston. I control some enormously valuable coal fields. Creston controls the railroad that carries the coal to market. But there's a canal that reaches the sea. I've been buying up the stock of that canal. So has Creston. Dean got a block of canal stock Creston and I both needed. We both made a rush for Dean to-day. Neither dared trust

to telegraphing ahead. Creston came from New York. You got me there first in the automobile. I had bought the stock that gave me control of the canal by the time that Creston arrived. Wilson, there was a plot to hold me up on the way home to-day and get away that certificate of the sale of canal stock. Then Dean could have sold it to Creston at a much higher figure—and I'd have been millions on millions out."

"That was what I helped spoil?" demanded Bart.

"That was the service you did me. But you must be on your guard now, Wilson. Creston has a bad crew doing his dirty work. They'll have you marked for punishment, but I'll try my best to protect you. And now, good-night! Smash the world's auto record—you'll have a chance to—and you'll be a made young man!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE BOSS OF THE RACER.

"He's no good," pronounced Ding, with an air of being very sure of his ground.

"I don't think much of Dunham myself," admitted Bart.

"But, then, I suppose I'm not a good judge."

"Why not?" Ding wanted to know.

"Oh, I'm prejudiced, of course. It's a question of whether Dunham or myself is to run the racer in the races—and, of course, I hate to think of any one but myself doing it."

"If the boss would only get on to him and bounce him!" sighed Ding, moodily. "I feel as certain as can be that Dunham doesn't want our machine to smash the record. He'll throw the race, I'm thinking."

"He won't run the racer in the race," Bart declared, positively.

"Why not?"

"I'm going to beat him out in the speed tests."

"You can't," objected Ding.

"There you go with your everlasting 'can't' again. My word is, 'I will.'"

"But you can't—you haven't. Why, Dunham has you a good three to five seconds behind in every test mile."

"I know that," Bart admitted, ruefully. "I can't understand it, either, but I will understand it before I'm through with the business."

"Dunham tells the boss it's because you're only a boy, and not strong enough to run a racer."

"Bosh!" snapped Bart, but he was very thoughtful as he walked away.

It was a month after the "runaway" episode.

Huntman had brought his money war against Creston to a successful close, having beaten Creston to the tune of several million dollars in the great coal fields matter.

But three weeks before Huntman's new French racing machine had arrived.

Ever since then the whole talk of this man of millions had been of automobiling.

Men of great wealth, in their idle moments, are sure to have hobbies that take up their whole thought for the time being.

Just at present Mr. Huntman thought more of lowering the world's automobile record than he did of anything else.

Perhaps his desire to win was largely due to the fact that his enemy of old, Mr. Creston, had also a racing machine, from which he expected the greatest things.

In three days more these two racers and a third, owned by a man named Duval, were to be pitted together.

The automobiling world felt that the world's record was to be lowered in this race, but opinions differed greatly as to which machine was to do the smashing.

Mr. Huntman had been true to his word. Ding had been raised to the grade of chauffeur, and was doing fairly well.

Bart had had his promised chance to prove himself fitted for running the racer.

At the same time, however, Mr. Huntman had taken the precaution of having a third chauffeur on hand, a new man, named Dunham, who claimed and showed great skill in handling racing machines.

"Give Dunham a good beating, my boy, and you shall run the racer," said Mr. Huntman. "But if Dunham proves to be the better man, of course I can't risk the loss of a record."

These were busy auto times in the garage on the Huntman country place.

Besides the three chauffeurs, there were three helpers in the garage.

All of these men slept there.

In a special room by itself stood the great French racing machine.

As Bart left Ding he stepped through into the room where the racer stood at rest.

"Why can't I get the best speed out of you?" Bart demanded, looking the auto over. "A thirty-thousand-dollar machine, and I boss it so badly that I look like thirty cents!"

Bart got down upon his knees, then finally lay out flat as he crawled under, examining every visible part of the machinery with the greatest care.

For, in two hours, he was to run the French machine over to the track, two miles away.

He was to have another chance to beat the performance of the stranger, Dunham.

Suddenly he straightened up, just as he had come out from under the machine.

There was a familiar whistle outside—Dunham's.

"What's that fellow coming in here for, when it's my next run?" flared the boy.

He glanced about him. There was but one open, handy door—that of the room that Dunham slept in.

Really without taking time to think, Bart darted into that room.

It was too late to get out again. The newcomer would catch him.

Quivering, our hero looked about him. There was a closet that would do to hide in—if Dunham didn't happen to go to that closet.

"I'll take a chance!"

Into the closet Bart Wilson darted.

Against the further wall hung a long automobile dust-coat.

Behind this the boy crouched.

But Dunham, still whistling softly, had stopped near the racer.

Just now Bart became aware of some very fine holes, at about the level of his head, that had been drilled in the wall.

Looking through them, Bart jumped.

For the holes gave a view of the other room.

Bart espied the new chauffeur sitting on the step of the great racer.

Dunham held a note in his hand, at which he was looking and chuckling.

"Funny, is it?" grimaced Bart, his rage rising as he peered at this fellow who seemed likely to cheat him out of running the racer.

Dunham rose, walked to the door and looked out, as if cautiously.

Then, as he came back, he thrust the note into one of his coat pockets.

From another pocket the fellow drew out a small box—and got down under the machine.

"Oh! oh! oh!" gasped Bart, with three different kinds of thrills, as he gained an idea of what was going on.

Dunham was doing something to the oil-feed of the engine and gearing—of that much our hero was sure.

Whatever it was, it was done in a couple of minutes.

"So that's the way Dunham beats me?" quivered the boy. "He's been fixing the machine on me before my runs! Oh, you scoundrel!"

Straightening up, Dunham came into his room.

But Bart no longer dreaded discovery. He almost courted it.

Straight to the closet door came Dunham and hung up his coat.

Bart quivered at white heat, expecting an instant row.

Dunham, however, took down another coat, put it on and went away.

A few seconds, and the fellow was outside of the garage.

"It's mighty mean to go through a fellow's clothes," groaned Bart. "But I've got to."

The box was gone from the coat hanging there, but the note had been forgotten.

Hiding it in his own pocket, Bart darted away.

Not until he had reached his own room did he fish the note again into sight.

"Jericho!" gasped the boy, as he read. For this was what the sheet of paper contained:

"Call at the express office for a package containing a new grade of sand that will mix with oil and defy detection."

"J. V. D."

"Sand! Oil! And Dunham monkeying with the oil-feed just before I take the racer out! Oh, oh, oh!"

Bart was up on his feet now, dancing, raging, turning pale and red alternately.

"Easy enough!" grimaced the boy, wrathily. "Dunham gets more speed out of the racer than I do. And he goes to the machine before I take it out! Gets down at the oil-feed! Somebody supplying him with sand! And all the while I'm wondering why I can't get more speed out of the racer! Oh, I'll give Mr. Huntman a little idea of why I'm such a slow chauffeur!"

Then, as suddenly, Bart stopped.

"No, I won't, either! Huntman will think I'm sore and carrying lies. I won't open my head. But, oh, something is going to happen—happen quick!"

CHAPTER VII.

BART SPRINGS A MINE.

"Now, hurry up, Ding! I'll get that racer in shape!"

"There ain't time. You can't," wailed Batson, hopelessly.

"There you go again! Can't ain't the word. 'Must' is the only word left in the language! Come! Get a brace on!"

Bart fairly dragged his friend out of the latter's room.

Together they hurried into that part of the garage where the racing machine stood.

"Shut that door, Ding, and stand by it. Don't let a soul in."

Bart took the precaution of making sure that there was no one in Dunham's room.

Then down under the machine went our hero.

There was a lot of work to do—oceans of it!—for Wilson would no longer trust to any part of the machine being in proper shape.

In the heat of that summer day he streamed with perspiration as he toiled.

"What's doing?" asked Dunham, curiously, halting before the door, an hour later.

"Bart's overhauling the machine," Ding answered, slowly.

"So? I'll help him."

"You can't!" proclaimed Ding. "Bart doesn't want any help."

"Not even mine?"

"No."

"I'll go in and watch him, then."

"You can't!" Ding retorted, in a voice that was almost a declaration of war.

"Oh, well, then," laughed the new chauffeur, "I'll go in my room and sit down."

"You can't!" Ding insisted.

"Eh? What do you mean, you impudent whippersnapper?" demanded Dunham, roughly.

From under the machine emerged Bart, hot, sweaty, greasy—dirty!

"Dunham, you keep out of here for the present," roared the boy. "If you don't, I'll go to the boss and raise a holler. I'm going to find out, if I can, why the racer always goes so much faster with you than it does with me. I want you to keep away while I'm at work here. If you don't, I'll put it to the boss. Now, will you skiddoo?"

"Oh, if you put it that way," laughed the new chauffeur.

"I do," Bart insisted. "I want to be left alone with this Frenchman, and I'm going to be, even if I have to raise trouble."

"I'll go," agreed Dunham, easily. "And, while I'm sorry that you should hint at anything, I wish you all success, boy, in making the racer go faster."

With that Dunham turned and walked away.

"He doesn't think I know anything about the sand that mixes well with oil," grimaced Wilson, as he put the finishing touches on his work.

He had cleaned off all the oil, renewing it with some from his own supply.

And now the word came that Mr. Huntman was ready to have the machine taken over to the track for trial. Ding was to run another machine, carrying the owner.

"Will she run right now?" whispered Ding, anxiously.

"Like a bird, I believe," glowed Bart.

"Success to you, old fellow."

After starting the engine, Bart felt like a general about to win a battle as he climbed to his seat.

He ran the Frenchman slowly out of the garage, turned into the road and passed Mr. Huntman, seated in another auto behind Ding.

"How does she run to-day, Wilson?" called the man of millions.

"Like a charm, I think."

"I hope you'll do something to-day, Wilson."

"I believe I'm out for a killing to-day, sir."

"I hope so. See you at the track."

Ding was away with his passenger.

Bart, though at the lever of a much faster machine, did not try for speed.

Just as a turf-horse must not be put to the plow, so a wonderful racing machine is not to be risked on ordinary roads.

So Bart ran at about seven miles an hour on the way to the track.

The great gates were open, and Bart ran in slowly.

But once on the smooth, fine, hard track, Bart let out the speed lever with which this French racer was equipped.

Whizz-zz! How good it felt to be running this wonderful engine!

"There's an ease about the running that I never had before," Bart muttered to himself. "Jupiter! I understand it all now. Now, to let her out!"

He had the mile track to himself, though he noted with satisfaction that there were many onlookers.

Over there on the grand-stand sat Mr. Creston. Beside the old man was Dalby.

They had never attempted to prosecute Bart for his kidnapping feat.

Undoubtedly they had intended to, but it was well known that the Huntman auto, badly disabled, had been found just where Bart had left it.

It had looked altogether too certain that no court would believe our hero guilty of any intent in the "runaway."

Besides, Mr. Huntman stood behind the boy, prepared to spend money for his defense.

Bart still had the two thousand dollars, safe in his employer's keeping.

"It was a game of millions then," Bart reflected. "Now the fight is just as hot to win the new auto record. Mr. Creston, I'm going to beat you once more, I believe!"

Duval, the owner of the third racing machine, was on another part of the grand-stand with a party of friends.

There was a sprinkling of strangers.

Huntman himself stood close to the judge's stand. Beside him was Dunham, staring eagerly at Bart's performance.

Now for a whizz! Feeling the racing machine behaving so well under him, Bart gradually let out the full speed.

Three times around the track he went, then slowed up at a signal from his employer.

"Now, get back there a way," ordered Mr. Huntman, "and come past me on a trial mile. I'll hold the watch myself."

Turning the long car, built only for speed, Wilson ran back nearly half a mile.

Honk! honk! With that hoarse warning he started. Before he had passed over a quarter of a mile Bart had his charge going at tremendous speed.

Our hero fairly held his breath as he made that mile.

Again he passed his employer. The mile was done.

Slowly turning, our hero rolled back.

His employer's jubilant look told the news.

"Something like, this time, Wilson," was Mr. Huntman's greeting. "You've got Dunham out for his laurels now. You've beaten his best mile by two and a fifth seconds."

"I can do still better, sir," Bart declared.

Dunham laughed disagreeably.

"Try it, Wilson," was Mr. Huntman's order.

Again Bart made the mile.

"Another three-fifths of a second better!" was Huntman's gleeful announcement. "Dunham, where are you?"

"I can beat the boy's work," declared the man, gruffly.

"Get down, Wilson, and let him try."

Bart wanted to object, but orders are orders.

Bart leaped to the ground, Dunham getting up in his place.

Now our hero watched beside his employer.

Dunham's first mile was a second and a fifth behind Wilson's best mile.

Second mile was an even second behind.

"I guess you can't do it, Dunham," was Mr. Huntman's greeting.

"Oh, yes, I will. There'll be another chance to-morrow," retorted Dunham, who felt now that his nerve was gone for

this day, and that any further attempts might result in a still worse showing. "Shall I take the machine home, sir?"

Bart opened his mouth to claim the honor of running the racer back to the garage.

But Mr. Huntman said, simply:

"Yes."

And that settled it!

Scowling savagely, Dunham ran the racer off the track.

Bart turned just in time to see a peculiar look that Dalby gave Dunham as the latter rolled slowly by.

With a sudden tightening at the throat, Bart gaspingly clutched at the telltale note in his pocket.

"J. V. D.—John V. Dalby!" quavered the boy. "Why didn't I think of that before? Why, of course. I see now. Dalby has never forgiven me. He wants to hit me where he knows he can hit hardest. Creston wants to snatch the world's auto record away from Mr. Huntman. Dunham is sent here as their tool. Mr. John V. Dalby, I'll find you out, for sure!"

"Come along, Wilson," said Mr. Huntman, in his most friendly tone. "I'm beginning to feel proud of you."

Just as they passed the grand-stand they encountered Creston and Dalby coming down.

"Get a move on, Creston," called Mr. Huntman, jeeringly. "Your men will have to brace if they're to get a machine over the ground as fast as this youngster did to-day."

"The kid does look a little self-important," laughed Dalby, disagreeably.

"I've got a right to feel chesty," boasted Bart.

"Oh?" jeered Dalby.

"Yes, sir; I'm going to smash the auto record."

"You'll do nothing of the sort!" Dalby retorted, bluntly.

"Dare to put that in writing?" challenged Bart, cheekily.

Dalby flushed. He, a man of great wealth, and a partner of Sydney Creston, to be talked to in this manner by a mere chauffeur.

"Don't put it in writing unless you're sure to win," jibed Bart.

Dalby looked angrily at the boy. But there was in Bart's eyes such a look of utter, bragging confidence that Dalby could not let the challenge pass.

So, taking out a card-case and a pencil, Dalby wrote on a bit of pasteboard:

"Wilson cannot and will not beat the world's auto record."

"J. V. D."

Bart read, with an inward start.

"Thank you," the boy said, quietly. "I'll save this for reference, sir."

Creston and Huntman had already started on ahead, as if the affair were beneath their notice.

Flushing still more, Dalby started after them, but Bart whispered:

"Just a word with you, Mr. Dalby!"

"Well, boy?" demanded the rich man, turning in annoyance.

"I shall treasure the writing on this card."

"Why?"

"Because it exactly matches some other writing that I have."

"Other writing?"

"Yes; a short note, signed by the same initials. The note says something about sand mixed with oil. Well, quite an interesting note, you know."

Dalby's flushed face paled in an instant.

"What are you talking about, boy?"

"As if you didn't know!" sneered Bart.

"I don't."

"It was kind of you to find Dunham and send him to Mr. Huntman! It was clever of you to supply Dunham with sand that he could put in the oil-feed to ruin my chances of running the racer in the great race!"

A queer, deadly look flashed in the eyes of Dalby.

"Boy, you want to be careful about saying such things to me! You are doing it at great risk! What do you mean by such—such cheek?"

"Oh, I've said about all I have to say," Bart returned, coolly.

"You've said too much!"

"Perhaps it hasn't interested you any, though?"

"Don't start the fiend in me!" snarled Dalby.

"Oh, I won't, then," agreed Bart.

With an air of the utmost contempt, the young chauffeur turned coolly on his heel, walking away from the partner of the great money king.

"I hope I'll never be rich," quoth the boy to himself, "if it will make such a scoundrel of me."

But he walked off in a jubilant frame of mind, for he had settled past any doubt that Dalby, and probably Mr. Creston, were in a plot to defeat the Huntman racer, and, incidentally, to discredit our hero himself.

"It'll make a good story for Huntman," thought the boy.

Yet the longer he thought it over, the more Bart felt like putting off the telling the next day.

"Dalby will surely get word to Dunham. Ding and I will watch Dunham, and there may be a better story to tell for the waiting."

So Mr. Huntman heard nothing of the extraordinary news that afternoon.

That evening Bart walked into the village, hung around an hour or so, then started homeward—homeward, for the garage was all the home that he knew.

Halfway out to the Huntman place the road was a lonely stretch.

Bart passed a great elm while thinking of the day's discoveries.

He had just stepped past the elm when he heard a quick step.

There was a sense of impending disaster.

Bart tried to turn, but too late.

Afterward he had a bare recollection of something heavy and hot hitting him on the top of the head.

But just then he realized nothing—for he had fallen to the ground and lay there as if dead.

CHAPTER VIII.

BART HEARS THE HONK OF DESPAIR.

There was a queer, throbbing ache in his head, a dull buzzing in his hears, when Bart next knew anything.

At first he wasn't quite sure that he knew anything, wasn't altogether certain that he was Bart at all.

It was all so queer, uncertain, vague!

He felt as if he had just come out of a long illness, and half-wondered what that illness was.

Then came the swift realization that he had met with some sort of disaster.

He wondered what that disaster had been. Did it have any connection with the racer?

But the bare thought of that wonderful racing auto brought him fully to himself, and with a violent start.

He opened his eyes.

He was lying on a cot in a meanly furnished room.

It looked like the loft of a stable.

"I don't care about wasting time here," muttered the boy.

He tried to rise, but found that he couldn't—and for the very simple reason that he was tied to the cot.

"Gracious!"

That one explosive word conveyed a world of meaning.

More than that, it brought another human being jumping to his side.

"Hello!" hailed Bart, and started at the recognition.

"Know me, do you?" snapped the other.

"Yes. You're the goat who tossed me good money on the promise that I'd sell out one of my best friends."

"You'll be sorry, soon, that you didn't."

"What am I doing here?" queried the bewildered Bart.

"Paying up," the other retorted, drily.

"Oh!"

That was all Bart said. There didn't seem to be any use in talking further, so he closed his eyes.

"Going to sleep?" jeered the other.

"Might as well," Bart responded. "It isn't one of the worst ways of killing time."

"Sleep tight, then. You were doped all day yesterday. I suppose you haven't got all the drug out of your system yet."

Bart didn't answer. He was thinking, wondering, puzzling about that great race.

"Doped all day yesterday? Lying here for twenty-four hours or more, drugged and stupid."

"Then this must be the day of the race!"

Bart shivered at the very thought. That race, without him running the great Huntman record-smasher, would mean about the same thing as the end of the world.

But Bart knew that he couldn't get away from this cot.

Nor would it do any good to talk with this acquaintance of another day, who would be sure to tell the boy nothing that he really wanted to know.

There came a knock from some other part of the room behind Bart.

Our hero had an impression that some one was being admitted. Then he heard another step on the floor.

"The kid's himself again," announced the fellow with whom our hero had just been talking.

"Yes?" came the almost whispered query.

The new step was beside the cot now.

Bart opened his eyes instantly.

John Dalby stood beside the cot, looking intently down at the boy.

"You've been something of a fool, Wilson," was the rich man's greeting.

"I guess I have," Bart admitted, readily. "I ought to have gone to Mr. Huntman at once."

"But you didn't?" laughed Dalby, his eyes lighting up.

"You'll pay the penalty, too. Huntman is down and through with you. He believes you have been paid to skip—that you sold him out."

"He'll know differently some day," Bart declared, bluntly.

"He'll have only your word that you didn't leave him in the lurch," sneered Dalby. "And Dunham won't win the race for him."

"Of course he won't," Bart flared, promptly. "He can't, for he won't run the racer. That's to be my job."

"You'd better be up and doing, then," leered John Dalby.

"The racing begins in about an hour and a half."

"What do you say?" Bart fairly screamed, fighting frantically against the cords that bound him.

He tried to snap his bonds by sheer strength. The race without him at the speed lever? It couldn't be! It was a monstrous thought!

"Lie still and easy," taunted Dalby. "You were brought here so that you'd be safely out of the way. It's Dunham's day at the lever. He's putting the last touches on the machine now. He won't win, either! Huntman isn't saying many nice things about you at this moment. In a few hours, perhaps, we'll let you go. Then you can explain to your employer, who'll be good and sore, anyway, over losing the chance to make the world's auto record."

"Ain't you afraid of the law?" Bart asked.

"What law?" Dalby demanded, innocently.

"The law of the land," cried the boy, angrily.

"Oh! Did you have any respect for that law when you kidnapped Mr. Creston and myself in that automobile?"

Bart flushed, but he retorted:

"That was an accident."

"You lie, boy, and you know it."

"You never had me arrested," Bart argued.

"Because you were smart enough to smash the auto—at Huntman's orders—and we couldn't prove anything. It will be the same in this case. You can't prove anything, boy. When you get loose, if you dare to breathe a word about me, you'll find yourself arrested for libeling me.

You'll find out that there is a law to prevent a homeless brat from saying libelous things about a rich and respectable man."

"Respectable!" sneered Bart, hotly. "Oh, yes, you're respectable! You're rich, because Creston finds that it pays to have you do the dirty work that he's afraid to do himself. And you think you're respectable because you've got a lot of money. There are better men than you in prison!"

"We won't argue," replied Dalby, with a smile. "I came here to say that you were safe while the race goes on. You're safe enough, so I don't take any further interest in you. Remember about not talking about me when you get out, or you'll find yourself in jail."

The door closed behind Dalby. Bart's captor looked at the boy and remarked:

"Great man, that!"

"Great?" sneered Wilson. "What makes him great?"

"He knows how to get his own way."

"Humph!"

Bart closed his eyes, as if, cowed by fate, he preferred to sleep the time away.

But he was quickly roused from his pretense.

Honk! honk!

"What's that? An auto?" he cried.

"Oh, yes," responded his captor. "The machines are arriving for the races."

"Then we're near the track?"

"So near that we can look out on the track from the windows in the next room."

Then Bart knew where he was, without further questioning.

He remembered the big, old stable overlooking the track.

"Oh, if I could only get out of here!" he moaned, inwardly, in his despair.

Honk! honk! Too-oot!

There was a racer, or he knew nothing about automobiles.

The sound drove him to despair, frenzy.

Yet Bart closed his eyes once more, as if to sleep. For Bart Wilson, desperate, was also "foxy."

With an eye just barely opened the boy saw that his captor was not looking his way.

Bart tried, cautiously, to free his feet. They were not so securely tied.

Honk! honk!

"I'll have a look at the thing," muttered the jailer, after a look at the boy.

He stepped through into the next room, though he left the door open.

Honk! honk!

The cars were going by swiftly, merrily now.

It was now or never!

Steeling every muscle, Bart yet held his breath. He must make the supreme effort, yet he must not make the slightest sound to give the alarm.

For an instant he tried to part his feet so as to snap the cords there.

That would not work. The cords were rather loose. How he tried to wriggle one foot free!

And at last—glory! He succeeded! Then the other foot came loose!

Gasping inwardly, Bart Wilson managed, noiselessly, to sit up.

The man in the other room stirred. Bart's heart seemed to come up into his mouth.

Oh, for just one minute—thirty seconds, even—undisturbed.

He waited, listened, trembling in every muscle of his body.

But there was no sound.

On tip-toe, Bart rose and made stealthily toward the door.

It was locked. His hands were securely bound—but in front of him.

In an agony of suspense, Bart Wilson tried to turn the key.

It creaked as it moved.

Then Bart prayed—prayed in the agony of his soul for a Help greater than any of his own.

Over went the key, the bolt was shot. If only there would be no interruption!

Bart got the door open.

Still cautiously, he tip-toed down the stairs.

There was another door before him.

He got it open—stepped into the sunlight—ran! How he ran!

From up in the air came a shout of rage that cannot be described.

Bart knew that it came from his ex-jailer, who had seen the flying fugitive. Bart ran faster than ever.

He was close, now, to the high wooden fence that ran around the race-course.

On the other side Bart could hear the honking of horns, the chugging of machinery, that he knew so well.

But as yet there was not another human in sight. It was at least a third of a mile around to the gate where there would be something of a crowd.

No one else in sight? Yes, there was one other. Bart realized that as he shot a glance of terror over one shoulder.

For his late captor, recovering his wits, had leaped through a window and was in the hottest kind of pursuit.

"Gracious! If I should fall and trip now!" gasped Bart.

The thought made him doubly cautious, even though he tried to increase his speed.

"Ah! There's the gate—the crowd!" thrilled the boy, as a bend in the fence revealed the goal toward which he was rushing. "Hooray!"

For just a second he glanced back. His pursuer, swearing hard, had given up the chase at sight of the people around the gate.

Into that crowd rushed Bart, breathless.

"Have they run the great record race yet?" he asked, quiveringly. "Let me through, please!" he added, desperately. "I'm Mr. Huntman's chauffeur in the great race! Let me through!"

"What has happened, kid? Here, let me cut that rope on your wrists."

It was a well-meant offer of help, but Bart pressed his way through the crowd, without answering.

"Here, wait until I cut that cord," advised a constable at the gate, who knew our hero.

"Don't you dare!" quivered the boy. "I want this goods to show!"

They stood back and let him through.

Honk! honk!

Before an audience of nearly ten thousand people, Dunham was, at that very moment, showing off the speed of the great Huntman racer.

In the midst of a little group of friends, just inside the rail, near the judge's stand, stood Huntman.

Cheers and hand-clapping answered as Dunham, now on the far side of the track, put on the best speed.

But it made Bart frantic.

"The traitor!" he yelled, as he darted across the track.

People saw the flying, disheveled boy, with his hands tied before him, as he darted across the track, straight up to Mr. Huntman.

They called, shouted, questioned, but young Wilson barely heard them.

Ducking under the rail, our hero stood, breathless, before his employer.

"You—Wilson?" gasped Mr. Huntman.

"What does this mean?" demanded one of Huntman's friends.

"What does it mean?" insisted the man of millions.

"Speak, can't you, you crooked little idiot?"

"I'll talk—as soon as—I get my breath," he replied.

Now Ding Batson hurried up to the group. Batson was silent, so far as speech went, but he talked with all the power of his eyes as he rested one hand on his chum's shoulder.

Slowing up once more, Dunham came by on the Huntman racer.

He could not help noting the excitement in the little group. Then his gaze fell upon Bart, who returned that look with one of hate.

"Pull that traitor off the racer!" gasped Bart, pointing with his bound hands.

Dunham paled, fumbled at the wheel, and all but ran the racer into the railing before he recovered his presence of mind enough to put on speed and dart by.

"Traitor, eh?" quivered Mr. Huntman. "Dunham is at least man enough to stick to his job. He's no fakir, rushing in in this theatrical way at the last minute! Wilson, you're as rotten as they make 'em!"

CHAPTER IX.

THE FIGHT OF HIS LIFE.

But Bart Wilson was not cast down.

An ordinary boy would have been. Bart was made of better stuff, stronger fighting stuff.

"You owe me an apology, Mr. Huntman," returned young Wilson. "You'll make it, too, later on. But I don't want it now. I want a word with you in private—that's all!"

"Oh, stop this rot!" retorted the man of millions, impatiently.

But Bart faced his employer with unflinching eyes.

"Mr. Huntman, tell me something," he quivered, "and answer me straight—on your soul!"

"Well?"

"Did I ever fail you before? Did I ever fake you?"

"No-o-o. At least, I never caught you at it."

"For shame, sir!" blazed Bart, righteously angry. "All I ask of you now, sir, is the favor of a word in private."

Huntman hesitated, plainly angry and suspicious.

"Do I get it?" Bart demanded.

"Oh, what's the use?"

"Then that's your sense of fairness? You refuse me a chance to show you that I'm not the fakir you called me? Ding, get out your knife and cut this rope!"

Batson quickly complied.

"Now, one last word with you, Mr. Huntman. You're set on winning this great contest of the racers, aren't you?"

"You should know, Wilson, if any one, how anxious I am to win and to smash the record."

"Mr. Huntman, I never lied to you or played you false in any way. Do I get the private word I have asked?"

Huntman hesitated, then answered, gruffly:

"Come on, then!"

Bart thrilled with triumph. He felt as if he had already won the fight.

Huntman led the way out into the middle of the field. The few people out there drew away, as if aware that their presence at close quarters was not needed.

As he walked near his employer's side he looked out of the corners of his eyes at other groups.

There was Creston, looking at the boy in wonderment.

Close to Creston was his lieutenant, Dalby, trying his hardest to look unconcerned.

"Well?" hinted Huntman, at last, halting.

Bart was ready for the issue.

"Mr. Huntman, you know as well as I do that it isn't in my make-up to do you, or any one, a dirty trick. I'm going to tell you the straight truth now!"

With that Bart plunged into his whole story. He told it quickly, snappily, but every feature of the story was there.

"And now, I hope, you understand, Mr. Huntman, that with Dunham on your racer you can't hope to win anything. You won't win—can't win—unless you turn that machine over to me. Do I run this race, or are you going to let Creston's paid tool sit at your speed lever?"

"Wilson," replied the man of millions, slowly, "I was never less able to make up my mind than now. I can remember only, though, that you've never before played tricks on me. But what if you, instead of Dunham, are in the pay of the other crowd?"

"Then I guess you don't really care much about winning

the race?" Bart answered, sadly. "I want to win it for you! I want the glory of running the fastest mile ever made in America!"

Huntman gazed long and thoughtfully down into the boy's eyes.

"I wish I could decide," he murmured.

"Would you believe me if you saw that note in Dalby's writing?" flashed Bart.

"I'd have to."

"Do you know Dalby's writing?"

"Yes."

"It's all right, then!" cried the boy, jubilantly. "I'll send Ding on the gallop for that note!"

"Wilson, you needn't!" broke in the man of millions, jerkily. "I've decided! You're straight. You, and no one else, shall run my racer to-day!"

CHAPTER X.

SMASHING.

"What! But she's a beauty!" gasped Ding Batson, admiringly.

"And has a winning chance now," added Bart Wilson.

"I hope so," replied Huntman, his voice slightly tremulous.

"At all events, sir, I made good on what I told you."

"You did, lad," admitted the man of millions.

The Huntman racer now lay under cover, just off the track.

Dunham had been ordered down from the seat, without explanation.

To Bart had fallen the task of driving the great prize machine under cover.

Huntman, Bart and Ding—they three, and no others—had been present at the overhauling of the great machine.

While they worked, the minor races of the day were being run; but these three were not interested in minor races.

First of all, Bart had taken out a liberal quantity of oil from the oil feed.

The oil did not show fine sand, if any was present.

But Bart had worked enough with lubricating oil to know what to do.

Close at hand stood Ding, with the jar of hot water for which he had been sent.

"We'll soon know, Mr. Huntman, whether there's fine sand in this oil," Bart announced.

Into the hot water in the glass jar went a quantity of oil taken from the oil feed.

Naturally, the oil floated on the surface of the water.

"Now, watch!" Bart advised.

He stirred the oil and water together with a clean stick.

At first it broke the oil up a good deal.

Then our hero stopped stirring.

Again the oil settled in a layer at the surface of the hot water.

But to the bottom of the glass jar fell a layer of fine sand.

More stirring, and more sand fell.

"Shall I go on?" demanded the boy. "Or are you satisfied, Mr. Huntman?"

"Satisfied?" demanded his employer. "When I see Dunham again I shall have a mighty hard time keeping my hands off of him!"

Then followed the hard task of cleaning every bit of oil off the machinery.

This was followed by washing down the metals parts with alcohol, to make sure that not a trace of the old oil remained.

Then came the re-oiling. It was finished at last. Bart Wilson and his pet machine were ready for any test that could be proposed!

"Now we'll win, Mr. Huntman!" he exclaimed, his eyes dancing.

"I hope so," replied the man of millions, cautiously.

"If I didn't believe it," quivered the boy, "I wouldn't have the nerve to run this glorious old machine out on the course. I've set my heart—my soul—staked my life on winning to-day and on smashing all past five-mile records!"

"The call has gone out for the big racers!" announced a voice outside the door.

"And we're ready!" blazed enthusiastic Bart. "Oh, ain't we ready, though!"

Ding and the capitalist threw the doors back, just as cheers went up from the spectators.

For Creston's machine, and the third one in the great race, were already on the track.

Then Bart Wilson, with a honk that fairly screeched of triumph, threw his speed lever over a little and went tearing around the track.

This was all show-work for the spectators.

The drivers of the racers, however, were testing their machines, to see that everything was in order and that the oil was running freely.

Huntman and Ding Batson dodged across the track, ducking under the rail.

To Bart's employer came Dalby, stepping briskly. He was followed, at a little distance, by Mr. Creston and a small but curious crowd.

"Huntman," called Dalby, "are we to believe what we see?"

"How do I know?" smiled Huntman, with a pleasant face.

"Who is going to run your machine to-day?"

"My chauffeur."

"Then what's that boy doing up on the seat?"

"He's my chauffeur."

"That kid?"

"Bart Wilson is my head chauffeur," replied Mr. Huntman, easily. "He's the only boy in the State that I'd trust to run my racer to-day."

"But he's only a boy," broke in Mr. Creston, objectingly.

"That has nothing to do with it," Mr. Huntman retorted, easily. "He is the best chauffeur I can find for the job."

"We object to his running the machine to-day," broke in Dalby, coldly.

"I'm afraid your objection won't hold, Dalby. Wilson is my choice."

"Our objection will hold," retorted Mr. Creston, angrily. "Huntman, do you think I'm going to be fool enough to risk my valuable racing machine on the track, when yours is running wild under the guidance of that brat of a boy?"

"What are you going to do?" asked Bart's employer, smilingly. "Draw out of the race?"

"Draw out of the race?" blazed Creston, who was as set as was Huntman on winning this greatest of races. "No, sir! If you insist on having that boy for a chauffeur, I'm going to protest to the judges."

"Creston," retorted Bart's employer, sharply, "I've heard of other reasons why you object to that boy. If you want me to, I'll name the reasons that I mention. I'll add that there is some proof about these reasons."

Mr. Huntman looked keenly at his enemy.

Creston wavered for an instant, then put on a bolder front.

"I don't want to hear any nonsense of any kind, Huntman, but I shall protest to the judges against allowing this brat of a boy to risk valuable machines and human lives on the track to-day!"

"Come right over to the judges now, then," retorted Huntman, starting to lead the way.

Still followed by the crowd, the principles in this little scene reached the judges.

Mr. Creston stated his objection to Bart Wilson.

"I can only reply," returned Huntman, "that I have the utmost confidence in the skill of my chauffeur, or I wouldn't think of risking my machine and my chances of winning in his hands. If Mr. Creston continues to object, and the judges sustain him, then I will let the other two machines race. After that race is over I shall insist upon the right of my machine to a test on a free track to see whether it can beat the time made by the winner of the other two racers."

One by one the judges nodded. Creston's jaw dropped.

"Very well, then," said the old man, sulkily. "Let the race go on."

It all happened quickly after that.

The signal was given, the racing machines ranged up.

Huntman had won, on the draw, the choice of position.

Naturally, Bart took the position closest to the rail, with Creston's big, powerful, swift machine next, and the third racer on the outside.

The start was to be made a quarter of a mile from the real starting line.

Together, the machines were to move down to the line

at good speed, yet keeping together, that the start might be fair.

If the start did not prove to be fair, the machines were to be ordered back for a fresh start.

Every one of the three chauffeurs had his nerves at the greatest tension.

Men could not last long under this terrific strain.

It was to the best interest of each driver to make a fair start.

There was an awed hush over the entire crowd.

Dunham, sore, smarting, sullen, had taken post just inside the rail, at some distance from the starting line.

If this traitor still harbored some design in his own mind, no one else shared his plan with him.

But Dunham was not, at this moment, observed by any one else.

Every eye was turned toward the great, throbbing racers.

"I wouldn't want many of these races in a year!" muttered Bart, trying to steel himself for this greatest ordeal in his life.

Now he became cold, steady, for the first signal had sounded.

Hands on lever and on steering wheel, Bart waited, feeling more than half numb, for the second signal.

It came. The Huntman racer moved to the fraction of a second.

So did the other two machines.

They moved on, with ever increasing speed, yet kept their fronts in line.

Nearer the starting line, the racers let out a little more speed, as by agreement.

It was hard, wearing, to have to run one's own machine and to keep in such alignment with the other two racers.

But they reached the starting line fairly.

Now they were off!

As they passed the line, the three ponderous machines went ahead so fast and so instantaneously that they seemed fairly to leap away from the ground.

In this instant Bart Wilson well nigh forgot everything.

He was nearly as much of a tense, strained machine as was the engine that he controlled.

He was there to win, was going to win—couldn't lose.

That was all he realized. Every movement that he made was almost without conscious thought about it.

He cared for nothing but the winning.

Rather than lose, he would have charged, unflinchingly, through a stone wall in the path.

So intent was the boy on winning that there was not even a thrill as he found his machine drawing into the lead just after the start.

Just as the machines crossed the line, Dunham leaped over the rail—stood in the track, waving his arms.

He meant to threaten to block the way, forcing the boy to run him down.

By this bluff the traitor hoped to get on Bart's nerve—to make him slow up or swerve.

And Bart saw this fellow—but paid no heed, gave him no thought.

It was no time to let nerves falter!

Whizz-zz! Slam! The speed was terrific, nerve-racking, heart-tearing!

A second dropped meant the race lost.

Dunham, having put himself in peril, must look out for himself!

Young Wilson was getting the last spurt of speed out of his grand racer!

Yet Dunham seemed rooted there in the course of the Huntman racer.

Bart was numb to feeling, but his hot blood leaped through a brain that throbbed for winning.

The racer seemed but a fraction of a second away from the man in its path.

Plainly, Bart Wilson's nerve was not to be shaken.

Dunham somersaulted backward for his life!

There he lay on the ground, unharmed, but wildly mad, as Bart and his racer whizzed past!

"Oh, I'll settle with you for this all!" roared Dunham, shaking his fist at the boy.

But his voice could not be heard above the noise of the engines.

The machines were already far past the quaking, raging traitor.

Four miles were covered in as many minutes, then came the final spurt.

A mile by a great auto racer seems to last hardly longer than a prolonged flash from the heavens.

Yet to Bart Wilson, put to the supremest test of his nerve, that last mile seemed to last for hours.

Though he whizzed by railing posts so fast that he could not see them, yet, had he not been still in the lead, he would have thought that his grand racer was but creeping.

Once the Creston nose touched the rear of the Huntman racer with a shock that made Bart feel the jar.

But Bart did not turn, did not alter his course by a hair's breadth.

In such a race all that happened to the rear of him must be looked after by those at the rear.

If the Creston machine fouled, then that racer must be barred out.

If Bart lost his life through another's recklessness—

But this boy with a nerve never thought of that.

In such a tremendously fast race a mix-up of the racing machines meant the instant death of all the chauffeurs who got their machines into the tangle.

Had young Wilson thought at all about the matter in those dizzy seconds he would have said that he preferred being killed to losing the race on which he had set all his hopes.

They were half through the last mile by now.

Bart knew that he was still in the lead—how much ahead he could not even guess.

Of course, there was a chance of losing the lead altogether in the remaining half.

But Bart ran his powerful engine without real thought of the others.

It was as if he had the whole earth to himself for the moment.

He thought of absolutely nothing but of watching his machine, anxiously alert, and determined to make every piece of the machinery do its fully best work, backed by brainy steering.

At the three-quarters—still in the lead!—how much!

Then, amid the cheering, Bart drove home.

He was still in the lead—how much?

He didn't care—didn't care a hang. He had come in first.

But had he lowered the world's auto record in the last swift dash?

Slowing gradually, Bart ran around the track once more.

Now, as he neared the judges' stand, our hero caught sight of Mr. Huntman's face.

Those radiant features seemed to tell the story.

"Wilson, you've lowered the world's five-mile record by two and a fifth seconds!"

It was over, then—the strain past!

In the first few seconds Bart Wilson felt supremely happy.

Then the reaction came.

He became so limp that he felt hardly strength enough to control the mighty machine that he had engineered on to victory.

"Steady, old fellow!" he gritted.

He got a grip on himself, turned slowly, cautiously now, and ran the racer back under cover.

The engine slowed, Bart got weakly down from the platform, attended to his engine, and then Huntman, Ding and a score of others rushed into the shed to wrench his hand away.

"Not too hard," the boy protested almost weakly. "That was a strain."

"Of course it was," bellowed Mr. Huntman. "But it was magnificently done. Back, all of you! Give the youngster some peace. Get out!"

"Ding," whispered Bart, "you've got one of the other machines here somewhere, haven't you?"

"Of course I have, Bart."

Ding Batson listened to the whispered directions, then speedily faded from the scene.

Bart heard his employer's congratulations calmly, almost indifferently.

Now that the fearful ordeal was over, and triumph a cinch, it didn't seem to be such a big thing, after all.

The trouble was that Bart Wilson, asleep for more than twenty-four hours under the influence of drugs, and aroused only by desperation for one critical hour, was now dead to nearly everything—ready to collapse utterly.

"You can leave the machine now, my boy," spoke his employer, kindly. "Come out into the air."

Huntman's arm supported Bart somewhat as they stepped outside.

At a little distance stood Creston, with Dalby by his side.

"Huntman, I'm waiting for you," called Mr. Creston, in his shrill, old voice.

"Here, at your service, then," rejoined Bart's employer, and he led our hero up to the pair.

There were many curious ones about, but they fell back under the significant stare in Dalby's eyes.

"Huntman," went on the aged capitalist, "a little while ago you made a remark that seems to call for explanation. You hinted at information that I wouldn't care to have others hear."

"Yes," admitted Wilson's employer.

"Are you willing to repeat that information now?"

"Quite."

Dalby strove to hide the anxiety that shone in his own eyes.

"You spoke as if I had hidden reasons for not wanting this boy to run your racer."

"And in my heart I believe you had such reasons," spoke Mr. Huntman, firmly.

The two enemies in the money world stared hard at each other.

"You spoke of belief, then," sneered Creston, in his thin voice. "A little while ago you bragged loudly of proof."

"I have some proof, I imagine," smiled Mr. Huntman.

"Proof of anything wrong on my part?" demanded Mr. Creston, sharply.

"Not directly against you," Bart's employer admitted. "But it puts things up close to you. At least, I believe it does. I haven't seen the proof yet."

"Haven't seen it?" jeered Mr. Creston. "What do you mean, Huntman?"

"Why, Wilson has told me of the proof—that's all."

"This brat again?" stormed Creston.

"Oh, I don't suppose he'll mind your calling him names, if you want to," laughed Huntman. "He has the satisfaction of knowing that he left your racing outfit in second place to-day."

"Boy, what proof of anything have you the impudence to claim?" shrilled Creston, turning and fixing his piercing, eagle-like old eyes upon our hero.

But Ding ran up just now, thrusting something into Bart's hands.

"Perhaps it doesn't amount to so much," replied Bart. "But, of course, Mr. Creston, you wanted to win the race to-day."

"What of that?"

"It looks as if some one who shared your wish to win had sent Dunham to Mr. Huntman to be his chauffeur. It must be that Dunham was to lose the race to your racer."

"But the proof?" Creston almost screamed.

"Well, Dunham was ordered to mix a very fine sand with the oil that was to lubricate the Huntman racer."

"The proof?" insisted Mr. Creston, stonily.

"The proof," snapped Bart, "is to the effect that some one close to you ordered Dunham to mix that sand with the oil. Here is the proof, if you want it—a note in Mr. Dalby's writing, ordering Dunham to do the dirty trick."

Bart held the piece of paper straight out.

Dalby leaped forward, but Huntman, watching him, thrust the fellow back.

Mr. Creston glanced at the paper, turned pale, then wheeled and flashed at Dalby a look full of utter contempt.

But in another moment the aged financier had recovered his presence of mind.

Handing back the paper, he replied:

"This is only a scrawl, Huntman, with initials at the bottom. If you consider it proof of anything, you are welcome."

Mr. Huntman, holding the note in one hand, pointed with the other at John Dalby.

"Creston," he inquired, bitingly, as his gaze still roved over Dalby, "is that your pup—the cur that you keep to bite at people whom you are afraid to attack yourself? If so, permit me to say that Dalby is a mighty poor, mongrel sort of pup! A yellow dog, in fact!"

Turning, Huntman led his own little party away.

Within five minutes Creston found himself alone with the now silent, quaking Dalby.

"John, you fool," quavered the old man, scornfully,

"there's nothing that you can say for yourself, so don't try to say anything. To send such an order in your own handwriting, signed by your own initials. Bah! I had a better opinion of your brains!"

"But I never thought that scrap of paper would turn up, Mr. Creston."

"You're a fool, John Dalby. And I can't use fools—they're too dangerous to me. John, you and I are through with each other!"

"For heaven's sake, don't say that, sir!" pleaded the lieutenant, tremulously.

"I repeat. We are through with each other. John, you never need look to me for another service."

"Don't say that, sir! Not just now!" stammered Dalby. "Mr. Creston, my whole fortune is tied up in copper stocks just now. You, alone, of my acquaintance, know how the copper market is to go. If you withdraw your support I shall go on the rocks—to the wreck and ruin of my fortune! Think of my family, too, sir! Don't cast me off now."

"John," returned the old capitalist, coldly, "when I am once through with a man I am very much through with him. You have proved yourself a fool. I couldn't trust you after this. I am through with you!"

CHAPTER XI.

"THE PUP" BITES IN EARNEST.

Things had quieted down again.

That is, as far as excitement went.

The great, record-smashing race was now three days past.

But Mr. Huntman had not been slow to prove his gratitude.

Bart's wages had been raised as if with a derrick.

Our hero was now one of the highest-paid chauffeurs in the United States—which means in the world.

More than that, Bart had been presented with twenty-five hundred dollars outright.

That, in addition to the two thousand of-bribe-money, which it now seemed certain would remain in young Wilson's hands, made a very sound nest-egg.

Huntman and his family had gone away for a few days.

Bart and Ding, left behind, had but little to do in the way of work.

"I'm not going to forget you, Ding, old fellow, in my good luck," said Bart. "And I owe you something, anyway. Not once on the day of the race did you say to me 'You can't.'"

"It would have been all the same to you if I had said it,"

grinned Batson. "Every time that I've ever said you couldn't do a thing you've gone right ahead and done it."

"That's because I simply won't follow any such fool word as 'can't,' you see," Bart laughed, good-naturedly. "But, now, Ding, come along. I need some clothes. So do you. We'll get 'em. We need some other things—a good time or two, for instance. We'll have them, too. You also ought to have a little bank account of your own. We'll attend to that at the same time."

"Hold on!" protested Ding. "I'm not going to use any of your money."

"Then we're going to fight!"

It ended by Bart having his own way in everything.

What a glorious time they had during those few days!

Creston and Dalby were no longer in sight.

Both, in fact, had disappeared.

But this fact, in the summer vacation season, excited no comment.

"There's going to be a band concert in town to-night," said Bart, the evening of the third day, as the two boys loafed in the doorway of the garage on the Huntman place.

"Going in?" Ding inquired.

"It seems to me that we ought to dress up and give the girls a treat."

"Give the girls a treat?" queried the puzzled Batson.

"Yes; give 'em the pleasure of looking at two handsome chaps like us."

It would be wrong to cheat the girls out of any such fun," Ding answered, gallantry.

Into the village they trudged.

But the end of the concert found Bart very wide awake.

"Let's take a good walk around, Ding," proposed Wilson.

"I'm not sleepy enough for bed yet. We'll take a round-about way home."

"You're thinking of that black-haired girl," grinned Ding.

"There were several black-haired girls in town to-night," yawned Bart.

"But only one that you noticed. The girl that I saw you in the ice-cream restaurant with when I missed you—the girl and her mother."

"I wonder which one that was?" mused Bart, pretending forgetfulness.

"Her name is Jess Morton, ain't it?" jibed Ding.

"Is it?" queried Bart, innocently.

"Oh, well, if you don't want to talk about her, you needn't," offered Ding. "But I haven't been asleep all the time. You've been seeing her often during the last six weeks."

"Why, I wonder if I have?" cried Bart.

"Ask her, then," challenged Batson. "See how she'll like your being in doubt."

"She's a great girl, ain't she, Ding?"

"A peach," said Batson, instantly.

"Yes, she sure is. She's going to be a school teacher, Ding."

"That's what she tells you."

"Well, she is."

"How long will it take her to get to be a teacher?" asked Ding, slowly.

"About four years."

"Then she'll never be a teacher."

"Won't live that long, you mean?" asked Bart, half-smiling.

"Won't live single that long," Ding declared, promptly.

"So many fellows after her?"

"I don't know how many fellows will try for her, Bart, but they might as well skiddoo right now."

"Why?"

"If they don't, you'll shoo them."

"Then you think Jess will be Mrs. Wilson in less than four years?"

Ding Batson halted, looking queerly at his chum.

"Bart, what kind of game are you trying to pass me? Do you think I'm fool enough to believe that a fellow who can smash the automobile record of the world won't be smart enough to shoot the courtship record full of holes?"

Bart laughed. They had drifted solidly into talking about Jess now, which was Bart's sole object in proposing the long walk home.

They had halted on a deserted road well out beyond the village.

"Ding," suggested Bart, "I'm in a bit of a guess."

"Trot it out and let's have a look!"

"When a fellow's got money enough to get married in style, and earning enough more to keep one decently, how long do you think he ought to wait before he marries?"

"Ought to wait until he finds the right girl," replied Ding.

"And how much longer?"

"What's the use of waiting any longer—after that?" demanding Ding, looking astonished.

"How old had a girl ought to be before she marries, Ding?"

"How old is Jess Morton?" came the counter question.

"Sixteen."

"Then sixteen is just the right age!"

"How old had the fellow ought to be, when he's got the cash and his name on the right pay-roll?"

"That, I guess," returned Ding, weighing his words care-

fully, "is rather out of my line. That kind of an answer ought to come from somebody better posted—an expert."

"Well, who's the expert?"

"Ask Jess Morton!"

The youngsters were seated on a stone wall, Bart drawing in the dirt with the toe of his boot and Ding chewing on a blade of grass.

There was silence for a few moments, a silence which Ding interrupted by observing:

"Bart, you don't want any advice. You don't need any. You've got something you're just aching to tell me. What is it? Spit it out!"

What Bart might have answered must remain only guessed at, for below them sounded a loud honk—the tune that had become a part of their lives.

"Who runs a machine up over this road?" asked Ding, glancing down at the approaching lights with a professional interest.

"Must be a tourist," Bart replied.

"Then he'll be sorry before he gets to the end of this rough road," observed Ding Batson. "It's the meanest, roughest kind of road that——"

The glare of the headlight was full in their faces now.

And just then the approaching touring car stopped with a decided jerk.

Two men leaped out in a twinkling, heading for the boys.

"Dalby!" jolted Bart.

"Dunham!" flashed Ding.

There was time for no more words, for the two men had attacked them in rousing earnest.

It was a swift, silent, hard, terrible fight.

The boys handled themselves for all that was in them, but they were up against men—older, bigger and more powerful.

Ding was the first to go to the wall. Then Bart succumbed under Dalby, whom Huntman had contemptuously termed Creston's "pup."

Click! click! Business-like enough these two assailants were. Beyond a doubt they had watched and followed the boys, and had come prepared, for now the wrists of each victim were locked in handcuffs.

Dalby roughly turned his prisoner over on his back.

"Thought you'd seen the last of me, did you?" snarled "the pup." "Wilson, I've been looking for this chance ever since! I warned you to keep out of my way—to keep your mouth shut! You wouldn't. You've ruined me."

"Ruined you?" demanded Bart. "I thought you were too rich and powerful a man for me to reach!"

"Old Creston has dropped me," snarled Dalby. "The blow came at just the time when I had a big fortune in-

vested in the stock market. Creston dropped me, and turned the market against me, as I knew he would. I'm ruined, and all through a homeless brat like you."

"You'd have been all right if you had left me alone," Bart declared, coolly.

"You heard Huntman call me 'the pup,'" raged Dalby. "You laughed then. Now you're going to find out what sharp teeth that 'pup' has when it gets the hydrophobia."

Rising, Dalby dragged Bart to the rear of the touring car.

"Give me your help, Dunham," ordered the ruined scoundrel.

Dunham brought a rope.

One end of this was knotted over Bart's ankles. The other end was made fast to the springs of the touring car.

Bart lay on his back, silent, but pale and shaking now.

He knew how "the pup" meant to use its teeth.

"Perhaps you think I'm satisfied now," Dalby snarled down into his face. "But I'm not! If I could make you meet this fate ten times over, it wouldn't satisfy my hate of you, you brat. We'll start up, dragging you behind over this rough road. We'll crowd on all the speed we can, until you're yanked, jerked and pounded on this road—until every bone in your body is broken! A mile from here we'll cut you loose, so pounded out of shape that no one will know you. But it won't satisfy my hate!"

Dalby leered as he enjoyed Bart's very plain horror. Then he turned to Dunham, standing by, and ordered:

"Now, bring the other brat here. We'll tie him on, too. Then for the deed!"

CHAPTER XII.

CONCLUSION.

"Great Scott! Where is the other brat?" demanded Dunham, in a shaking voice, as he turned.

"Don't you wish you knew?" mocked a voice from the darkness beyond.

Ding was up the road, hovering jubilantly, and hardly distinguishable.

"I'll get you!" roared Dunham, making a leap forward.

Whizz! Just in time did Dunham dodge to escape the stone hurled by Batson.

Having a very small hand, Ding had employed his time to good advantage by squeezing until he had freed one hand from its shackle.

With an oath Dunham leaped forward.

Two well-aimed missiles struck him, but Dunham still pursued.

Then Ding, turning too late, tried to escape, but Dunham sprang upon him and bore him to the ground.

Once more the handcuffs clicked, and this time so hard that Ding would not again pull free.

Dalby's whistle sounded imperatively.

Dunham came back triumphantly, carrying his prisoner on his shoulder.

Very patiently Ding submitted to being tied to the end of the car.

"It won't be such a much of a ride," he observed, coolly—so coolly, in fact, that Bart took notice.

"Jump in, Dunham," Dalby ordered. "Give us a start. I'm crazy to have this thing done with."

Dunham, on the seat, gave the lever a push forward.

Nothing doing!

He tried again, but with no better luck. Then, with an oath, he jumped down to the ground to look at the engine.

"That confounded brat has disabled the works!" he snarled.

"Guilty!" admitted Ding, cheerfully, and Dalby, swearing, jumped from the car.

Below, on the road, came the rattle of wheels, the sound of a horse's hoofs.

"Help!" roared Bart. "And help mighty quick!"

"Who's that?" called a voice from below.

"Bart Wilson, in a peck of trouble. I——"

Ding had added to the alarm.

But now their captors had dropped down upon them, smothering their cries.

"We'll have to cut loose—mighty quick, too!" panted Dunham.

"Carry these brats with us. We'll finish them in the woods!" quivered Dalby.

In frantic haste he untied the rope at Bart's ankles, and Wilson, his mouth free, made best use of the time by yelling at his loudest.

The horse on the road below was coming forward at its best gait.

Yet before help could come the two scoundrels, each with a boy on his shoulder, had cleared the wall and taken to the woods.

"Help, this way!" roared Bart.

For an instant Dalby halted. He struck Bart a blow that stunned the boy.

Yet when Bart came to he was lying comfortably on his back on the ground. His hands were free.

His head ached miserably, yet what did that matter, with a soft, girlish hand stroking his forehead with a wet handkerchief?

"Jess!" murmured Bart, as he opened his eyes. He

closed them again, as if afraid to wake up and find that this wasn't true.

"Well," laughed pretty Jess Morton, "are you surprised, Bart? Did you think we'd hear you call for help and not hurry along?"

Now Bart not only opened his eyes, but sat up, supported by Jess' firm, round, white young arm at his back.

The scene had changed slightly.

Ding was lying on his back, also, but his eyes were open and he seemed far from uncomfortable.

The handcuffs had been changed to the wrists of Dalby and Dunham.

Moreover, both of these rascals showed badly battered faces.

Jess Morton's two big brothers, Dick and Tom, stood over the manacled pair with grim faces that accounted for the change in things.

"Lucky we was coming home as we did," remarked Brother Tom. "We heard that yell."

"And I knew your voice at once, Bart," Jess broke in.

"I'm glad of that," said Bart, softly.

"These gazabos tried to carry you as far as they dared," added Brother Dick. "Even after they gave you the hard throw-down we kept on after 'em, while Jess stopped here."

"They both look as if they had had hard falls," grimaced Bart, as he looked at the battered faces of his uncomfortable enemies.

"Something hit 'em," grinned Brother Tom. "That something was mad and hard, too, I reckon. Jess was back here, so she didn't see just what happened."

"I'm almost sorry I didn't see," Jess flashed, with spirit.

Then she turned to look down tenderly at Wilson.

"It's all right, anyway, Bart," she said, simply.

"Who are these gentlemanly looking tramps, anyway?" demanded Brother Tom.

"That one there," nodded Bart, "is John Dalby. He was a pretty rich man up to a few days ago. He told me, a few minutes ago, that he had been cleaned out of his wealth in Wall Street. He's still respectable, though, I suppose," added Bart, mockingly.

"As to his being respectable," retorted Brother Tom, "I guess the judge and the jury can settle that question."

"Don't be fools!" uttered John Dalby, hoarsely. "Let me go, and at once, or you'll find that I've still enough of wealth, friends and influence left to make you very sick of this night's work."

"You better try the silence cure, Mr. Dalby," advised Brother Dick, grimly. "You're booked for the village jug to-night. Your kind ain't just exactly popular around here, even if they are rich and very respectable!"

"Where's your mother, Jess?" Bart queried, as he rose to his feet, helped somewhat by the girl.

"Out in the road, sitting in the wagon," Jess answered.

"Then we ought to go to her, and not leave her alone," Bart offered.

"We'll take these bunged-up chromos as far as the road," hinted Brother Tom. "Then, if you'll wait until we take mother and Jess home, we'll come back and help you land these raw-faced beauties in the jug."

And that was the plan carried out.

Not much later in the year, Dalby and Dunham started for prison, and they're still there.

Bart settled, satisfactorily, with Jess the questions he had first put to Ding.

There's a Mrs. Bart Wilson now, nor are there many prettier young wives to be found anywhere than Jess Wilson makes.

Ding Batson—well, the way he has been "sprucing up" lately indicates that he has either plans or hopes.

Both young men are still with Mr. Huntman.

Ding has slowly, though surely, worked his way up to head chauffeur for Huntman.

Bart gave up the job a year ago, when he went to New York to take a good business position in the office of a company that Mr. Huntman controls.

Neither Bart nor Mrs. Bart have ever grown cold toward automobiles.

But Bart owns one of his own now and has a man to run it for him.

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